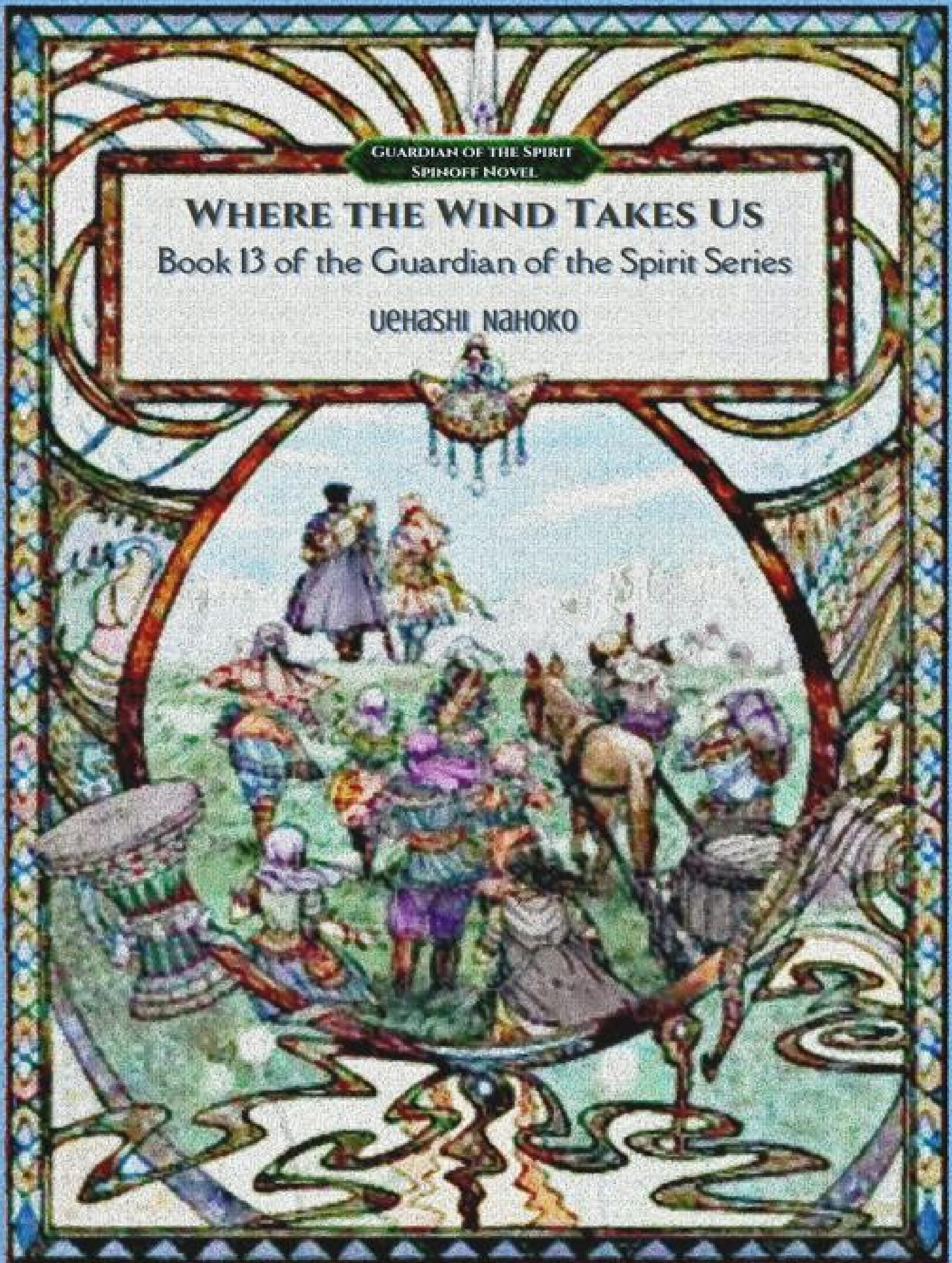
Guardian of the Spirit
Spinoff Novel
Where the Wind Takes Us
Book 13 of the Guardian of the Spirit Series
Uehashi Nahoko

Where the Wind Takes Us

(Book 13 of the Guardian of the Spirit series)

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prologue

the wind
at our backs

Orange light filtered in through the thin screen woven of rasal reeds that stood in front of the window. Sari awoke with a start, surprised that she'd slept until sunset. She was suffering from a terrible fever that caused her to lose all track of time.

Everyone's already gone by now… I guess they didn't want to wake me.

Sari felt a brief pang of loneliness, but then she heard the high-pitched call of a bird. There were people milling around outside the hut, speaking in low voices.

It wasn't evening, then, but early morning. Sari had slept even longer than she'd thought.

Someone lifted the cloth curtain that served as a door and entered. They noticed that Sari was awake and signaled to the people outside.

Footsteps echoed louder as people moved closer. A few moments later, Sari's rasal screen was moved away from the window; the harsh light of the morning sun coming in was blinding.

Sari didn't rise from her bed. She shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed at the people working busily around her. The person who had come in to check on her was her daughter. Her face had been shadowed in gloom before, but now her sharp features were clearly visible.

"Mom…"

There was pain in her daughter's eyes: the kind of pain that it was difficult to describe. Eona was no longer a child, but Sari still worried about her leaving.

"Is something wrong?" Sari asked.

Eona rubbed at her forehead as if to stave off a headache. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me. We have other things to worry about, mom. Don't you feel it? The direction of the wind has changed."

Eona rubbed her cheek against Sari's very gently. Her skin felt so cold.

"Be careful when you go," Sari said quietly. "I'll be waiting for you when you come back." She rubbed her cheek against her daughter's. It was a typical greeting and parting gesture for them.

Eona spoke a traditional farewell. "As the river flows to the sea, as the wind blows through the leaves on the trees, so I shall return to you." She pulled away, but paused to touch her mother's hair, soft and affectionate. She took Sari's hand and squeezed it gently.

Sari watched Eona leave, feeling once again that same pang of loneliness she'd felt when she'd awakened. She cursed the weakness and sickness of her body, which made it so difficult to rise and offer up words of thanks and prayer to bless her daughter's journey.

Forcing herself up, Sari took a few hesitant steps outside her room and faced the people outside. In a thin voice, she said, "Sadan Taram! Wind musicians! Wanderers and exiles! Travelers of the wind, scions of the ancient Tol Asa people! Let us sing and dance, without hesitation or pause, of our people's rage and grief, love and hatred, so they will never be forgotten."

Four people--those chosen to begin the journey, including her daughter--called back to Sari. "Sadan Taram! Wanderers and exiles! Through a thousand gorges we have traveled, and we have climbed a thousand mountains, moving as the wind through the grass. Sadan Taram! Travelers of the wind!"

Sari heard a flute from somewhere in the crowd, playing a long, high-pitched note that rose into the sky. The flute was joined by the rhythmic beat of many small hand drums that shook the ground beneath her feet. All at once, the Sadan Taram began dancing in time to the beat, swirling around Sari in a riot of movement and color.

"Sadan Taram! Travelers of the wind! My friends, my family! Through a thousand gorges we have traveled, and we have climbed a thousand mountains, moving as the wind through the grass. Over rivers and mountains we have walked, through endless fields of rice and grain, all the way to the sea. We possess the power of the spirits, the radalo! Sadan Taram! Travelers of the wind! My friends, my family!"

Their camp was on a small island covered in tall rasal reeds. The dancing of the Sadan Taram startled the birds hiding the in reeds, making them scatter into the heavens. The four people chosen to travel away from the camp, including Eona, broke away from the dance and started walking away.

Sari did not dance. She returned to her bed so that she could lay back down. Before the travelers passed out of sight, Sari's younger brother, Gamal, caught her eye and gave her a reassuring nod. He was tall and bearded. She was glad that he was accompanying her daughter.

Gamal turned his back on Sari and the others and kept walking toward the sun.

Their island camp was on Loata Lake, which straddled the border between northern and southern Rota. The lake's water was warm and crystal clear, so it was a perfect place to stay for every season except winter. The lake was also an important one for trade, so the area was much traveled, with well-kept roads leading north and south.

The lake was familiar to the Sadan Taram. There were stories of their journeys to and from this place dating back to ancient times. Sari turned on her side and watched her daughter and two other women walking along the side of the lake with her brother as their guard. They were only four in number, but Sari felt as bereft as if all her people had left her behind.

Though she had said the words of parting with her daughter and her people, Sari couldn't shake a deep sense of unease. She had prayed to protective radalo guardian spirits to end her sickness, but her prayers had fallen on deaf ears. She hadn't been chosen to accompany her family because she was sick. It was hard for her not to take that as an ill omen.

This land carried memories of a great war fought by the Talsh Empire. The Sadan Taram's journey would allow them to discover the memories and secrets of that war, but Eona had never led an expedition before. That, too, troubled Sari. She could do nothing except hope that her daughter would be equal to the task, and that those who'd gone with her would serve her to the best of their abilities.

Sari looked out the window of the small hut, watching her daughter, brother and the other women walk along the side of the lake through the rasal reeds until they passed out of sight. Then she closed her eyes.

part one

a new journey

chapter one

at the herb market

The wind whispered through the grass as Tanda and Balsa walked across the plain. Tanda paused briefly to adjust his pack on his shoulder. Balsa glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

Tanda had been gravely wounded in battle, and though he had mostly recovered after he and Balsa returned to the mountain hut near the capital, this long journey was taking its toll on him. She looked him over for signs of pain and distress, but he just shook his head and smiled at her.

"Is something wrong?" Balsa asked.

"Not at all," Tanda said. "I was just thinking that people are made of pretty strong stuff. You can knock ‘em down over and over again, and they always get up. Like weeds. They're tough enough to grow anywhere."

Balsa huffed out a little laugh. It had been a year and a half since New Yogo's war with the Talsh Empire had ended. This area hadn't been affected by any battles, but Balsa and Tanda had seen many soldiers—injured and not—during their journey. They'd also met families who had lost sons, fathers, and brothers. In some cases, the bodies had never even been recovered.

Tanda had lost his left arm during the war, but he wasn't self-conscious about it. Several men in the market had missing limbs or had suffered other obvious injuries. The war had been a terrible one; the Talsh were responsible for the burning of trading cities like Shirogai (although they didn't burn all the cities themselves). New Yogo's capital, Kosenkyo, had been destroyed by a cataclysmic flood caused by spring coming to Nayugu. Poverty, like war wounds, was a lot more common than it used to be.

Kosenkyo was now little more than a stone mound on a muddy plain, though efforts to rebuild it were underway. Families built small homes out of wood and lent their efforts to erecting more permanent structures with their neighbors. By good luck, Rota had been blessed with excellent harvests for the past few years, and their merchants were more than happy to cross the newly reopened borders to trade food for other goods. The new Mikado subsidized food purchases to make it easier for people to buy it.

The Herb Market, where Balsa and Tanda were, was right on the border between New Yogo and Rota. It was held once a year at the end of autumn, and was open for only three days. Despite this limitation, many people from all the nations on the northern continent gathered to purchase quality herbs, ingredients, and medicines from the market. Balsa saw Yogoese, Sangalese, Kanbalese and Rotan merchants scattered in the crowd.

The first Herb Market after the war ended had been more sparsely attended than this. Rotan cities like Shirogai needed time to rebuild and recover, and trade routes had to be re-established after New Yogo opened its border to foreign travelers again. This year, the market was just as lively as Balsa remembered from the time before the war. The

pride of the herbalists who ran it was the backbone that kept this place the foremost market for medicines in the region.

Clear autumn sunlight illuminated the shops to either side of the street. There were far more Rotan people here than Balsa expected to see. It wasn't common for there to be more Rotan people at the Herb Market than Yogoese people. *I guess after the war, everyone's eager for a little shopping and entertainment, to take their minds off it,* Balsa thought as she passed by another Rotan man.

Balsa was glad that this place was looking lively again. It was better to have it be like this than muted by fear and loss.

Riders kicked up clouds of dust as they rode down the street. Families strolled from shop to shop, pointing out rarities and odd-looking items. Their excitement was infectious; Balsa smiled.

The shops did a brisk business, and so did the street musicians scattered throughout the crowd. Balsa tapped her foot to the beat, feeling the lure to start dancing or singing along with the music, though she refrained. They were almost at Tanda's favorite herb store. She could tell because he was leaned forward and practically drooling, and also because the store was quite a bit bigger than the ones around it. He clenched his right hand in excitement and adjusted his pack as he entered inside.

Balsa was still smiling as she thought of all the times she and Tanda had visited this store together before. The last time they'd been here, Balsa had noticed Asra and Chikisa being dragged away by a slave trader as she'd waited for Tanda to finish paying at the counter. She wasn't expecting to make any such fateful encounters today, but she

kept her eye on the outside of the store, as usual. The harshness of the sunlight made it difficult to see clearly.

The music drew Balsa's attention again. She wasn't sure why. Maybe because the music wasn't Yogoese? It sounded Rotan or Kanbalese to her. She let herself listen more closely and realized that she'd heard the song before in Kanbal when she was just a little girl. She'd heard it since, too, on her long caravan journeys with Jiguro, and when she'd finally returned to her homeland a few years before. The noise of the people and horses around her muffled the sounds of the singing voices, flutes and the drums, but she'd know that song anywhere. It stirred a strong emotion within her.

I know the song, but I don't know what it's called.

Then Tanda called out to Balsa from behind, and she turned to look at him. He was standing next to a tall Rotan woman wearing elaborately patterned red and yellow clothing. Her long brown hair was braided and coiled on top of her head. The uncoiled ends of the braid hung nearly to her waist. A few prayer bells were sewn to a sash that hung from her shoulder. Every time she nodded, the movement was accompanied by the tinkling of bells.

That looks like a Sadan Taram musician, Balsa thought. That made sense. She'd heard the Sadan Taram play the song that had just captivated her on several occasions. She and her foster father, Jiguro, had traveled with the Sadan Taram once when she was around sixteen or seventeen years old. She could still remember the sight of all those men and women in bright-colored clothing moving through the tall grass with Jiguro bringing up the rear, guarding them.

Jiguro was one of the King's Spears—a great warrior of Kanbal who was sworn to serve the nation's king. He was the youngest man to earn that position in a hundred years, and considered something of a prodigy. Jiguro had thrown all of that away to save Balsa's life when the brother of the King of Kanbal, Rogsam, ordered her killed. His best friend, Karuna, was Balsa's father and the King's physician. Balsa was only six when she and Jiguro fled from Kanbal. Jiguro would never return, except as a spirit.

Balsa's life with Jiguro was far from easy. They were constantly being pursued by assassins who wanted both her and Jiguro dead. But that threat was long past. Looking back on her years with Jiguro now, Balsa felt no lingering fear or resentment for their treatment, only a gentle sadness.

Jiguro and Balsa had met many people in the course of their travels. She couldn't be expected to remember them all. She had no trouble remembering the time she and Jiguro had spent with the Sadan Taram. They were colorful and unique in how they presented themselves, and music had a way of lingering in her mind.

The Sadan Taram woman was talking to Tanda animatedly, nodding up and down as she said, "Yes, that's right! That green light around it is yaral sha. It's more expensive than most herbalists can buy, but if you *really* want it, can…"

They started haggling over price. The Sadan Taram woman wanted two silver coins for it, which was certainly excessive. However, she'd heard of Tanda by word-of-mouth and was willing to drop the price to one silver coin and five copper coins.

"It's my best offer!" the Sadan Taram woman said. "I wouldn't give it to you if you weren't so cute."

Tanda glanced in Balsa's direction, flushing a little in embarrassment. "Uh, it's not really right to call a man past thirty ‘cute,' is it?"

Balsa smiled at him and shrugged. If he had to flirt a little to get a better price, she didn't care.

The Sadan Taram woman looked at Balsa, her eyes widening in surprise. The light streaming in from the shop's doorway made it difficult to see Balsa's face from where she was standing, but no one should have any trouble seeing the spear clutched in her hand.

The Sadan Taram woman called out to Balsa, but her words were drowned out by the sound of hoofbeats and shouting outside the shop. Balsa went outside to see what was going on.

There were six riders in the street ahead of Balsa, all with their backs to her. They were Yogoese; she could tell by embroidered symbols on their sword belts. Those symbols represented a minor noble family that lived to the east of here in Midori Mansion. They'd probably crossed the border into Rota to serve as guards for the Herb Market.

"Sadan Taram!" one guard shouted imperiously. "Thieves! Hand over all your belongings right now!"

A woman answered him. Her voice shook, but her words were clear enough. "I don't know what you mean, sir. We've done this every year for a very long time and I've never heard this kind of complaint. Have we committed some kind of crime?"

"Confiscate everything," the guard commanded the others. "Our lady's bracelet must be here."

Three guards dismounted and approached the Sadan Taram woman. The guard captain and two other guards remained mounted with their spears raised, preventing anyone in the immediate area from fleeing.

"We're not thieves!" the Sadan Taram woman cried out. "We paid for our permits and offered thanks to your lord for allowing us to be here, just like everyone. This is the first time we've ever been accused of something so heinous! If you do find a bracelet, what's to stop you from claiming it belongs to your lady simply so you can punish us? It isn't fair!"

One of the guards seized a bag that the Sadan Taram woman held and dumped its contents onto the street. There was makeup inside and some jewelry as well, but none of it was Yogoese in style, and it was all too poor of quality for a Yogoese noblewoman to lay claim to.

"You see?" the woman fumed. "What do you intend to do, search my person next?" She undid her belt with hasty, furious movements and prepared to undress, but the guard captain shouted at her to stop.

"We don't do such uncivilized things as strip naked in front of a crowd here," the guard captain said contemptuously. "Search her instrument. Break it apart if you have to. The bracelet may be hidden inside."

Well, shit, Balsa thought. She'd hoped the guards would back off after searching the woman's bag, but this situation had just taken a turn for the worse. If the bracelet wasn't found inside the broken instrument, the guards would probably drag her off for further

interrogation, and she would resist. The loss of her instrument was a blow to her pride and her livelihood, yes, but it was even more serious than that, from her perspective. She wouldn't allow the guards to take her away, and it was very likely that she would be killed.

Balsa wasn't about to let that happen. She wasn't sure if the guards knew that they were provoking the woman to the point where she would die rather than lose her instrument, but that didn't really matter.

One of the guards picked up the woman's 13-stringed zither and prepared to break it.

A young man with a slight beard—also Sadan Taram, judging by his clothing—seized the guard by both wrists and squeezed. He glared up at the bearded guard captain and said, "You are an ignorant Yogoese guardsman. I am of the ancient Tol Asa people. We play the instruments that delight you and ring the bells that signal evil fortune. That instrument is a sacred object, a relic known as shata, the water harp. The Sadan Taram are the only ones who may touch it. If you destroy it, it will be the same as killing us in cold blood."

The young man looked familiar to Balsa. *Is that...Gamal?*

The guard captain snorted a laugh. He let out a shrill whistle and drew his sword from his hip. The other guardsmen did the same. The young man forced the guard to let go of the water harp and knocked him down into the dirt while the woman carefully retrieved the instrument. She set it behind her and picked up a short quarterstaff that lay among her scattered belongings.

She and the young man had no chance. The guardsmen were almost certainly war veterans, and they were trained to fight. The Sadan Taram were not. The young man's quarterstaff was larger than the woman's

and he knew that he should use it to block oncoming attacks, but he wasn't able to go on the offensive. A guard kicked him hard in the chest, breaking a few ribs, but he scrabbled to his feet and kept defending.

A guard came up behind the young man and slashed his back open. He fell again, screaming as his blood dripped onto the street. Only the heavy pack that he carried on his back prevented the sword cut from being a fatal wound. The young man turned towards the guard who had attacked him and elbowed him hard in the chest. The guard went tripping backwards, but he pulled the young man down with him; they landed face-up in the street.

The mounted guards removed the scabbards from their spears and raised their weapons to kill the young man and the Sadan Taram woman accused of theft. Just before their strikes fell, another spear struck a mounted guardsman's, breaking off the tip of the weapon with a strident clang.

The next instant, the guardsman with the broken spear went flying off his horse. He'd been kicked off, but everyone was so distracted by the street fight that no one could tell who'd done it at first. The other two riders moved to protect their comrade, kicking up dust as their horses moved and further obscuring the new combatant.

Balsa—of course it was her—ignored the other two mounted guards for the moment, placing herself between the young man who looked like Gamal and his attackers.

The guard captain frowned in puzzlement. What was a thirty-something Kanbalese woman doing, attacking them with a short spear in the middle of the street? Balsa herself offered no explanation. She

crouched down with her spear at the ready and glared at the guard captain.

Another mounted guard ran up on his horse and aimed his spear at her right shoulder. The blade gleamed too bright in the early autumn sun, making it difficult to see and aim; Balsa avoided the strike with ease and pulled him off his mount.

The other mounted guard was still coming, spear raised. Balsa tucked the shaft of his spear into her armpit and used the butt of her own spear to push him from his horse with a hard shove. The guard went flying off his horse. He didn't even have time to cry out. He landed on his back with a soft thump like a fallen sack of flour.

The onlookers that had initially been drawn to the spectacle withdrew a little, giving Balsa and the guards some room as the riderless horse went berserk and broke into a gallop in the middle of the market. By good luck, the horse ran into the other guard who was attacking on foot, so they were both incapacitated.

The guard captain stared speechless at Balsa. All five of the other guards were on the ground, leaving only him mounted and ready to fight. The young man, accused woman and several other Sadan Taram gathered protectively around the water harp, but they made no move to fight.

The guard captain frowned. "This is none of your concern. Tell me who you are so I can write you up for your punishment later."

"My name's Balsa." She wasn't even out of breath from the fight. "And this *is* my concern. The Sadan Taram fed and sheltered me when there was no one else. It's only right for me to express my gratitude."

Gamal was still on the ground, but now he forced himself up to his elbows. He recognized Balsa.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" the guard captain asked. "Shielding a thief is the same as being one, under the law."

Balsa nodded. "I don't believe they've stolen anything, but if they have, I'll accept any punishment you want to give us all. But you didn't find the stolen bracelet in their things, so you don't have any evidence of theft."

"Everyone knows they hide their spoils inside their instruments. If we don't search inside, we'll never know if they stole it or not."

"Impossible," Tanda called out from the crowd. His Rotan was accented, but passable, and the gentle tone to his voice carried over from language to language. "The Sadan Taram do not conceal objects inside their instruments. They don't even use them for storage."

Balsa frowned at Tanda as he approached. She didn't want him getting embroiled in any trouble. He should have stayed at the store until this situation had blown over, but she understood why he hadn't. Tanda was no better at ignoring people who needed help than she was.

Tanda went past Balsa and knelt next to Gamal to check his injuries. "The Sadan Taram's sacred instruments are believed to hold the shapes of their guardian spirits. There's nothing more important to their culture. The idea of hiding a bracelet in one would never occur to them."

"This looks bad, but the wounds are shallow," Tanda muttered in Yogoese so that only Balsa could hear. "Looks like they were planning to interrogate him."

"This man needs treatment, and so do the wounded guards," Tanda said in Rotan. "I think that should be everyone's first priority. There's a hospital right there that should have enough beds. When everyone's treated, we can all talk further and settle this issue peacefully."

The guard captain paled, but he was furious, not frightened. He knew that Tanda's proposition was likely the right one, under the law and in the eyes of the many witnesses to this event. Even so, he didn't like being made a fool of by a foreign herbalist. If he still had his other guardsmen on his side, he might have tried arresting Balsa and the others now and accepting the consequences later.

Another man on a fast horse rode up to the guard captain. The people in his path moved away for safety reasons. He pulled up on his reins and asked, "What's going on here?"

The guard captain rode closer to the newcomer and whispered in his ear. The newcomer whispered something back, and the guard captain frowned. He considered for a long, drawn-out moment, then faced Gamal.

"It seems the lady simply misplaced her bracelet. It has been found."

Gasps and titters from the surrounding crowd. The guard captain removed a silver coin from a pouch and tossed it at Gamal. "For your medical expenses."

The accused woman picked up the coin and was about to hurl it back at the guard captain, but Balsa shook her head. "Now's not the right time for anger. Let's get him better first. Go after revenge later." She took the coin from the woman's fingers carefully, then slipped it into Tanda's bag.

To the guard captain, Balsa said, "We'll keep this. He's an herbalist, so he knows where to buy medicine."

Tanda smiled faintly and nodded. "The cuts aren't deep, but there are a lot of them, and getting hit in the back was a shock. As long as he doesn't start coughing up blood, he should be fine, but I need to start treatment right away."

"Oi! Shouldn't you get an actual doctor for him?" one of the onlookers asked.

"I am a doctor," Tanda said. But they were in the Herb Market; there were probably a dozen doctors more qualified than he was within a hundred yards. Several men and women pushed their way out of the crowd to help Tanda within moments, and the busy street became an impromptu hospital tent.

chapter two

eona, daughter of sari

Balsa and Tanda's lodgings at the Herb Market were close to a hot spring famed for its medicinal effectiveness. Even when the Herb Market wasn't open, travelers visited this town from miles around to take the hot spring cure. Tanda and Balsa were looking forward to taking a dip in the hot springs as well, but they didn't get the chance: they were too busy with Tanda's new patient. Gamal wasn't beyond healing, but if his wounds were left untreated for too long, they would become severe enough to kill him.

Tanda washed Gamal's wounds thoroughly, then started preparing medicine. Balsa helped him work around his missing arm, adding herbs to boiling water and holding the bandages in place while Tanda wound them. For the deeper wound on his back, Balsa shifted Gamal toward Tanda at an angle, supporting him so that Tanda could stitch up the wound.

"I'm kinda getting used to this," Tanda said.

The Sadan Taram remained near Gamal's side all through his treatment. One of them, a woman named Kii, had rushed to the market to buy a list of herbs that Tanda had given to her. Her instrument was a

small hand drum. "Do you have much experience?" Kii asked. "It seems so."

"Yeah." Tanda chuckled. "Treating this is easy, like a baby eating rice. They can do it without teeth, even. That doesn't mean he doesn't need care, but he should be doing much better in a couple days."

"That's a relief," Kii said. "I thought so. You two work well together, like old friends, and I knew that you were acquainted with Gamal, miss. Your paths met once before, and you marched to the beat of the same drum."

Tanda bit off the thread he'd used to bind Gamal's wound with his teeth. Balsa smiled.

A few hours later, Gamal was burning up with fever. "That's from the sword wound," Tanda said. "I washed it as best I could, but contaminants got in before I could treat him. Hopefully it will break soon." He gave Gamal some medicine to bring down the fever.

"Is his life in danger?" Kii asked. She'd stayed with Gamal the entire time. A few other Sadan Taram women were also sitting nearby, talking in low voices and watching over Gamal.

Tanda shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

"How soon will he be able to walk?"

"Hm." Tanda thought for a moment. "Well, he's young and healthy otherwise, so I don't think his recovery should be any longer than five days."

The women behind Kii whispered to one another. "We can't spare five days."

"We cannot, but he must remain," Kii said. "If he needs five days to get better, he will remain here for five days. We have no other choice but to go on without him."

More whispers from the Sadan Taram women. Tanda looked to Balsa in puzzlement. They both knew a little about the Sadan Taram's nomadic ways, but Tanda didn't understand why they couldn't stay with Gamal for a few days until he was well.

Sansa, the woman who'd been accused of theft at the Herb Market, stood up. "We can't keep traveling without Gamal. Without a guard, we'll be easy prey for bandits or wild beasts."

The Sadan Taram were no strangers to the dangers of the road. When they encountered bandits they often handed over all their money and valuables in exchange for their lives, but without Gamal as a guard, it was more likely that any bandits they encountered would take more from them than just money.

Traveling further into Rota along well-kept roads would keep the Sadan Taram safe from most bandits, but they were closer to northern Rota than southern Rota, and packs of wolves roved the forests and the hills. There weren't many cities or places to camp, so they would have to make do outside most of the time. Without Gamal, who could crush a wolf's skull in a single strike, they wouldn't be able to defend themselves nearly as well.

"You might join up with a caravan for protection," Tanda suggested.

"We can't," Kii said. "No caravan follows our journey's path. We might be safe for a while, only for the caravan to turn away to their destination and leave us in a dangerous location."

Sansa turned to a young woman and asked, "What should we do, Conductor?" 'Conductor' sounded like a title. Gamal was her uncle. She appeared too young to be leading a group of Sadan Taram.

The young woman looked up. "Did you say your name was Balsa?" she asked.

Balsa frowned a little. "Are you looking to hire a guard?"

Kii and Sansa smiled at each other like they thought that hiring Balsa was their leader's idea all along.

"I can't help you," Balsa said. "I have to get back to New Yogo before winter."

"Why?" the leader asked.

Balsa shrugged. "I'm my partner's missing hand, and that's where he's going. If you were headed toward New Yogo, I might be able to help you out, but I don't have the time or the inclination to go out of my way."

A complicated expression passed over Tanda's face, then vanished. "If it's me you're worried about, don't be," he said. "I can travel anywhere, Balsa, just like you."

Kii appeared troubled. "If you're a guard-for-hire… well, that's not what I expected to hear."

"What did you expect, then?" Balsa asked.

Kii and Sansa exchanged glances. Mere moments before, they'd believed Balsa was the answer to their traveling woes, but it seemed that this wasn't the case.

"Balsa," Tanda said. "We can go, if--"

"Don't go ganging up on me now," Balsa said. "I'm the one who'd have to protect you all if things go wrong. Besides, they can't afford me."

Kii nodded. "I hadn't considered that. Conductor, did you know that Balsa is ranked as a first-class bodyguard and caravan guard? They're the very best, but no one can hire them cheaply."

Tanda looked at Balsa and nodded a little. He understood now that she was actually trying to be considerate of these women. They couldn't afford the cost of hiring her.

Balsa was being considerate in another way, too, though Tanda wasn't aware of it. It was the Conductor's role to protect her band, and if she couldn't do it on her own, she would be shamed. Asking Balsa for help wasn't the best option; not yet. She hadn't given up on solving this problem on her own.

For the Conductor's part, she knew that there was unique protocol when a Sadan Taram band hired on a guard from the outside world. She remembered all those rules now, feeling a prickle of discomfort at the back of her mind. She'd gotten so used to Gamal protecting them all that she didn't like the idea of hiring someone else.

"Forgive us," Sansa said. "We are ignorant of things like guard rates. We don't hire guards often."

The Conductor nodded. "Would you be so kind as to inform us of your rate, Balsa?"

Balsa told them what she was usually paid per day. The Conductor winced, then pursed her lips. The price would be a pittance to a wealthy band of traveling artists or to a caravan owner, but the Sadan Taram were far from wealthy.

"You said before that Gamal owed you a debt for food and shelter," the Conductor said. "Surely that's worth a bit of a discount."

Kii shook her head emphatically. "Forgiveness, but when the Sadan Taram harbor a person, it is with the expectation that there will be no reward, monetary or otherwise. For us to shortchange Balsa in such a way would be dishonorable. I now think that Balsa denied our request initially because she understood this."

Kii turned to Balsa and smiled. "Who would have thought we would ever cross paths again? It's been almost twenty years since we last traveled together. I never thought you'd appear to rescue us in the market out of the blue like that." She smiled again. "You got stronger, just like you wanted. I bet you could beat Jiguro with the spear now, if you two ever competed."

Balsa smiled back at her. Kii was three years younger than her. When they'd first traveled together, she was a child with a bright future and a forthright way of thinking that was easy for Balsa to understand. They got along well in those days, and she hoped they'd part on good terms now. Sansa was more than ten years older than Balsa and was close to fifty years old.

Balsa wondered how the other Sadan Taram she'd met before were doing now. She and Jiguro had traveled with more than a dozen. But she didn't ask, because asking would make her more likely to stay, and she really was trying not to get hired on as their guard.

It was true that Balsa wanted to stay with Tanda, but that wasn't the only reason she didn't want to travel with the Sadan Taram again. She was afraid that if she did, she'd remember the past. She didn't want to remember herself as she'd been at sixteen.

Gamal opened his eyes. Balsa thought that he'd been sleeping. His breaths came out as painful gasps, but his eyes were alert. He'd probably heard most of the conversation. "Balsa," he said hoarsely. "I'll pay you whatever you want. Please help us."

Balsa looked at him, and for a brief moment she saw the face of the eighteen-year-old young man she'd met so many years ago.

Gamal shifted his gaze to Sansa and said, "I want to talk to Balsa alone."

Sansa nodded and made a gesture that caused the other Sadan Taram to move around her. "The merchants should be done bathing in the hot springs soon. We'll bring back hot water for you."

Sansa and the other women left Balsa and Gamal to talk. The young woman called the Conductor glanced back at Gamal apprehensively, but she, too, left.

Tanda got up, too, and said, "I think I'll take a turn in the hot spring. You and Gamal can have a nice long talk."

"Thanks," Balsa said.

The room felt far emptier with everyone gone, and the sound of Gamal's tortured breathing was so severe that it forbade speech. He took a deep breath and let it out, trying to suppress his pain, then gritted out, "We are… fewer, than we once were. Five years ago, a terrible plague came and swept through the Sadan Taram like wildfire. The Tahsa people are responsible for laying our people's souls to rest, but they were also affected by the terrible plague. Too many died for them to keep up, including their own." He shuddered. "We few who are

left are all that much more precious because of our loss. Please help us, Balsa."

Gamal's eyes were fever-bright, almost crazed. His pupils were abnormally large. "Our last hope, we placed in Eona. She bears the water harp, the shata--our most sacred instrument. She is the Conductor--the woman you just met."

Gamal didn't speak for a while. He stretched out on his back, still struggling for breath. "Her full name is Eona, daughter of Sari. She is nineteen."

Balsa's heart beat faster. She looked into Gamal's eyes with a severe expression. Something in Eona's face was familiar to her. Balsa had known Sari, her mother, but she didn't think the resemblance was just that. Her features were straight with hard edges, like they'd been carved by a chisel. Her skin was a shade darker than the other Sadan Taram and had a different, softer sheen. The fire in her brown eyes could be caused by desperation, but it was possible that it had always been there, as part of her--a burning desire to succeed.

Balsa saw Eona's mother in her… but people had two parents. "I knew she was Sari's kid just by looking at her. Who's her father?"

Gamal blinked. "The Sadan Taram have no fathers. All of us raise our children like they're our own. You know that."

Balsa didn't say anything for a long time. Then she shook her head. "You need help, fine. You win this time, Gamal: I'll help you. You have yourself a guard, but not for free. I'll charge you half my usual rate. For the rest, I expect you to pay me in information."

Gamal appeared puzzled, but he accepted Balsa's terms. He lay back on his bed, red-faced and sweating, and closed his eyes.

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After Sansa and the other women came back carrying hot water, Balsa left Gamal in their care. It was early evening; several merchants passed her by as she walked down the inn's hallway. She smelled something tasty being made in the kitchens and felt her stomach growl.

The inn was a fairly small one and the walls were thin, so Balsa could hear people laughing and talking as she walked. She didn't run into anyone on her way to the back door, which led to the hot spring.

The hot spring was out in the open and not covered by the inn's roof. Plumes of white steam from the spring rose into the darkening sky. The moon was less than half-full, so Balsa could barely see a few feet in front of her.

There was a set order that people were supposed to use to enter the spring, though that order was only lightly enforced. Local warriors and merchants were permitted to use the spring first, followed by traveling merchants and visitors from other cities. Traveling musicians like the Sadan Taram were last in line.

Balsa shifted the screen in front of the hot spring a little to the side, then looked up at all the glittering stars. Tanda approached her, though it was hard to make out his face in the darkness.

"The water even smells wonderful," Tanda said. "The river deposits rich silt all along this valley. Even from here, I can feel how nourishing it is."

Tanda took a few steps closer to Balsa. "So? Did you decide to accept the job?"

Balsa nodded. She hadn't intended to accept this job, so she felt like she owed Tanda an explanation. Any explanation she gave would be a long one, so she decided to get comfortable first. She shrugged out of her clothes and set them to the side of the hot spring. Tanda joined her, and she leaned on his shoulder as they eased into the warm water and looked up at the sky.

Tanda listened patiently as Balsa told him a brief version of her shared past with the Sadan Taram. His expression betrayed surprise, but he didn't ask her anything, letting her speak until she was done. His expression shifted from surprise to profound understanding.

"I see. I never knew about all that," he said.

Balsa offered him a bitter smile. "Well, I would prefer if you could remain in ignorance, but it doesn't seem like that's an option anymore." She sighed. "The idea of traveling with them again... it feels like a heavy weight I have to carry. And I don't want to. The person I was when I was sixteen... well, I don't like her very much." She wrinkled her nose. "I had about as much self-control as an untrained foal."

Tanda laughed, but he didn't say anything. He'd known Balsa for most of her life. If he wanted to correct her own assessment of herself, he could, but there was no point. That didn't mean Tanda thought Balsa should judge herself harshly.

After a pause, Tanda said, "You know, you were just learning how to kill people in those days. You always said back then that it didn't bother you, but I always knew it did. It still does. I don't think you ever get used

to murder, no matter how much you do it or how long you live. It leaves a mark on your spirit."

Balsa looked up at the stars.

"I don't think you need to worry about this job too much," Tanda said. "You're not the same person you were then. You're strong enough to carry anything, even the weight of painful memories."

A muscle in Balsa's jaw tightened. Tanda knew more about what she was worried about now, but he still didn't know everything. There were some things that she didn't know how to share.

The night wind swept through the trees surrounding the spring, seeming loud in the stillness.

"What will happen to Gamal?" Tanda asked.

"He has to stay here until he recovers. Then he should be able to make his way back to a Sadan Taram camp. What will you do?"

"I don't think Gamal will be able to travel far on foot for a while," Tanda said. "I'll hire a boat and drop him off. Then I'll probably go home." He chuckled. "I'm kind of looking forward to the journey. I haven't seen much of Rota beyond the Herb Market."

Tanda chuckled. "I'm kind of looking forward to the journey. I haven't seen much of Rota beyond the Herb Market."

Tanda's master, Torogai, was a magic weaver who had a hut in the Misty Blue Mountains in New Yogo. He'd traveled all over New Yogo with her to learn magic weaving and gather medicinal plants, but he'd never traveled beyond the Herb Market in Rota. There were good reasons for this; Tanda was the only herbalist for miles around the

capital, and people often sent for him for help. He couldn't stray too far from home for very long.

Life and death lie along the flow of time. Existence inevitably moves to nonexistence. The only thing all living beings have in common is suffering.

Tanda remembered Torogai's words to steady himself whenever he remembered a patient he lost to disease or gangrene. Tanda gave his patients his all, but no one could save every patient. Helping Gamal was important to him, and he couldn't do that adequately on the road.

"When are you leaving?" Tanda asked.

"Tomorrow morning."

Tanda and Balsa talked for a while longer in the dark.

"When are you coming home?" Tanda asked.

Balsa didn't give him an answer. Her work as a guard was dangerous. There was never any guarantee that she would return to the hut in the Misty Blue Mountains alive. She tried not to interpret the pain of parting in her heart as an ill omen.

chapter three

a mother's secret

"We're heading to Euroka Tahn!"

Her father's loud call was like a sudden flash of lightning in the darkness. Rumina awoke to the call, trembling finely from fear and covering her face with her hands. Her heart felt like it was about to pound out of her chest. Euroka Tahn meant "Valley of the Forest King" in the language of her people.

The last light of the sun poured through Rumina's window, warming the thick, textured rug beneath her feet. If she strained her hearing, Rumina could make out the bleating of goats outside. The young goatherds were guiding the flocks home for the evening. She'd fallen asleep in her chair some hours before, but now, she was wide awake.

Rumina's dream troubled her. She rubbed at her elbows to comfort herself in a gesture that she'd copied from her father, who was long since dead.

We're heading to Euroka Tahn!

Rumina was relieved that those were words heard only in her dream, and not in reality. She could still remember the day when her

father departed for the Valley of the Forest King. She buried her face in her hands and prayed.

"Rumina?" Rumina's brother, Kumu, was at the door.

"Come in," Rumina said.

Kumu opened the door and entered the room. He wore a white, finely woven sleeveless undershirt and leather boots that were a little too big for him. His cheeks and nose were red from exertion and he was sweating all over.

"The herd by Sanzu Forest was attacked by wolves," Kumu said. "What are the wolf hunters doing, anyway? I thought they were ordered into the western forests to protect the flocks better, but..."

Kumu told Rumina that five goats had been devoured by wolves yesterday. He'd gone to Sanzu Forest to verify those deaths for himself, though he was only thirteen and it wasn't his place. The Agachi would investigate the wolf attacks as they saw fit.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt," Rumina said. She smiled, and her brother smiled back.

"Are you feeling all right?" Kumu asked. "You don't look well."

Rumina shrugged. "I'm all right. I just had a nightmare."

"A nightmare? What was it?"

Rumina told Kumu about her strange and terrifying dream. Kumu listened, then asked quietly, "You're not having doubts, are you?"

Rumina didn't answer. Kumu put himself at her elbow in two steps and said in a tone of alarm, "Are you? Maybe you shouldn't go on with the wedding, then. If you saw dad in your dream, maybe he opposes you

marrying into the Magua clan. Our family's honor is at stake. We can't mix our blood with a family that's so lowborn--and certainly not Rotans."

Rumina's eyes widened. *I had no idea Kumu was so racist. When did that happen?* Their family was the Aru clan of the Tahsa people. The clan had clung to power and influence in Rakul Province for hundreds of years in a small, wooded region called Aru. The Magua clan were prominent lords in northern Rota and had been for many generations.

Kumu's attitude was entirely incomprehensible to Rumina. Their mother was descended from the Magua clan through their grandfather. They celebrated her grandfather's birthday together as a family every year with a party and lavish gifts. A match between Rumina and a member of the Magua clan wouldn't be unusual in the slightest.

Rumina and Kumu's grandfather was the lord of Rakul Province; his name was Gilliam. His manner was somewhat gruff and stern, but Rumina always enjoyed visiting him because her mother's brother Azal was also in attendance. She liked her uncle Azal more than many of her relatives.

Rumina's grandfather was tall and still strong despite his age. Azal, too, was tall and practically towered over him. At a distance and side-by-side, they seemed very much alike, but while her grandfather's mood never softened, her uncle always smiled when he was talking to his sister. When they were younger, Azal brought toys for Rumina and Kumu based on what his own children liked.

Uncle Azal inherited the rulership of Rakul Province, but that wasn't what he wanted. Her grandfather had made him his heir. After that happened, Azal smiled a lot less than he did before.

Azal proved less stern than Gilliam. He made more trade deals and opened Rakul Province's borders to travelers. The province was much more prosperous now than it was during the rule of Rumina's grandfather.

The Aru clan that Rumina and Kumu's father was descended from was in a decline. Both the Aru clan lords and the people serving them had suffered a decades-long run of bad luck. No one knew why, though rumors abounded. Rumina considered most of them ridiculous. Rumors were just that, and in her experience, people would believe just about anything if it made them feel better about themselves.

Rumina ran over the details of several of these rumors in her mind and understood why her brother was speaking against their mother's clan, though she didn't like the reason. There was a rumor about the Aru clan and the Magua clan that did touch on their family's honor, but she'd never thought her brother would buy into it.

Not that stupid rumor again.

Rumina was old enough to remember her uncle Azal before he'd become the lord of the province, but Kumu wasn't. He spent his days among Azal's retainers, some of whom had Aru blood like they did. He'd absorbed their malformed sense of pride and felt that their mother's family made him inferior in some way.

Teenage boys really could be incredibly stupid.

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Rumina glanced out the window. She and Kumu were alone in the house now. Their parents had perished together in an accident that destroyed their wagon with them inside it.

So much had changed since their parents' deaths. Her grandfather had lost his eldest son suddenly and collapsed from shock and grief scarcely four days later. As his health failed, the leadership of the Aru region of Rakul Province was taken over by the Aru clan, her father's people, though they could not claim official lordship, only stewardship. Other members of her grandfather's family and the lords of other northern Rotan clans stepped up to fill the power vacuum caused by his illness.

Rumina and Kumu's fates were tied to the Aru region because of their father, who'd been part of the Aru clan. People worked hard and were poor. Their herds of sheep and goats were harried by wolves and bandits roamed the forests at night.

Rota's war with Talsh hadn't helped matters. Most of the damage caused by battle was in the south, but taxes on everything from food to clothing to medicine had risen sharply in recent years. The Aru clan had little enough to spare to start with, and now they had nothing.

When she was old enough, Rumina was granted control of this portion of Rakul Province. Like her uncle Azal, she'd never wanted to rule anything. She didn't know how. The problems she'd been given would have cowed an experienced ruler and administrator. She tried her best to keep existing trade routes open and to negotiate new deals, but as hard as she tried every day, she felt like she was constantly lost. She wanted her parents to be alive.

Though Rumina was young and inexperienced, she knew that the problems in her part of the province were only getting worse. Nothing she did seemed to fix them. Her grandfather had died at the end of summer this year, increasing the burden on her and the other lords who had stepped in to govern his territory. She was starting to learn that pride was expensive. Though Rakul Province was poor and getting poorer, the Magua clan and other lords of the region had insisted on throwing a grand state funeral as a display of wealth and power to the neighboring provinces.

Building the tomb for her grandfather took the better part of half a year. Because Gilliam was her grandfather and his oldest son was dead, Rumina's family had borne the expense of the funeral. If her uncle Azal hadn't swept in to spare her and Kumu that burden, they would be destitute now.

After the funeral was over, Azal investigated Rumina's circumstances and told her that he would pay the additional taxes incurred by the war with Talsh on her behalf. She was his niece, and he had loved his sister. He would do his best to support his sister's children.

To that end, Azal proposed a match between his son Ohru and Rumina. The wedding would take place next spring. Rumina didn't object to the match itself, but she would have to relocate after she was married, leaving her brother in charge of their home and this part of the province. He was only thirteen, and she wasn't sure he was ready.

Kumu's entire future was uncertain. The law of Rota meant that if she married into the Magua clan, her brother would become the head of the Aru clan, by Prince Ihan's decree. However, Azal hadn't confirmed

that this would happen, and that lack of confirmation disturbed Rumina. She suspected that her uncle would use the Aru clan's weakened position to unite the Aru clan and Magua clan under the law, with the justification of her marriage.

"Would that really be so bad?" her uncle had said to her. "This land can't support itself. The Aru clan needs the Magua clan's help if the people living here are going to survive. You are wise enough to know that the good of the people outweighs petty political games."

Rumina had agreed with him in public, but privately, she considered him to be playing political games, himself. But that didn't matter. The Aru clan was in a state of decline, and there was no way to reverse that now. She and her brother were the last representatives of the clan left in Rakul Province.

Perhaps part of her brother's pride came from the idea that the Aru clan were indigenous--they'd settled the Aru region before the first Rotans came over the mountains from Kanbal. Back in those days, their people were called the Tahsa. The clan was called Aru by the Rotans, after the name of the region they controlled.

Many centuries had passed since that time, and now, all of the Aru clan's neighbors were Rotan. Their mother was Rotan. Rumina and Kumu were Rotan people, whether Kumu liked that or not.

Other members of the Aru clan still lived, but all of them had married into Rotan families. This development could be seen in two vastly different ways. One was as further proof of the Aru clan's weakening power and influence, and the other was to see this relatively gentle merging of the Aru clan into Rotan society as an inevitable side effect of outside pressures. The Aru region wasn't the only place that

was suffering after the war with Talsh. All the clans had to work together if they were going to regain Rota's former prosperity.

Rumina sighed. She remembered when her parents were young and the Aru clan was still wealthy and numerous. The tragedy that the intervening years had wrought filled her with a feeling of profound grief.

By all accounts, the marriage of her parents had been a cause for celebration throughout the province. It marked the beginning of trying to forge stronger ties between the Aru clan and the Magua clan. New trade deals were made as a result. The hope was that the marriage would make both clans stronger. Maybe it would have if her parents hadn't died.

Her grandfather's stubbornness also played a role in worsening relations between the two clans. The Aru clan had a long, proud history, and Lord Gilliam had considered that an inconvenience and a potential threat to his own position. His attitude hadn't pleased her mother at all. Rumina remembered hearing about fights between her mother and grandfather from Yurima, an attendant who served the Magua clan.

Rumina was old enough to understand what her mother was complaining about at the time, but Kumu wasn't. She understood even more about the situation her parents were facing now that she'd assumed their role. She visualized the conflict between her mother and grandfather as a fight between two trees, one old and gnarled, the other youthful, supple and just starting to grow. Her grandfather had chosen to overshadow the sapling her mother was trying to tend, all but destroying the alliance between the Aru clan and the Magua clan.

One of Rakul Province's only resources for export was wood. The Magua clan out-competed the Aru clan for logging and shipping contracts, building up a firm foundation for themselves in both industries when Rumina was still a child. There was no doubt in her mind that her uncle--now the leader of the Magua clan--was skilled at negotiation. They were trading with southern Rota again after the war and the long years of resentment that had slowed many profitable trade routes. The Aru clan didn't do business with Rota's southern lords, and everyone knew that southern Rota had far more natural resources than the north.

From Azal's perspective, the Aru clan must look like a withered sapling clinging to life. There was no saving it now.

"You and your brother are my precious niece and nephew," Azal had said to Rumina. "The blood of the Magua clan flows in your veins. The ancient Aru domain is now poor and withered and is unworthy of your efforts. All you need to do is return to your family here and accept the help and protection of the Magua clan. I am certain your people would rejoice if you did so."

Rumina didn't think that her uncle was trying to be selfish or stubborn like her grandfather. He wanted Rakul Province stable and at peace, and folding the Aru clan into the Magua clan seemed like a good way to achieve that. The Aru clan had once been as strongly rooted in its alliances and favored industries as the Magua clan was now, but now it was just barely hanging on. Rumina wondered if that had been her grandfather's plan all along. Maybe he'd only allowed her parents to marry so that he could use their union to meld the Aru clan firmly into the other Rotan clans once and for all.

There were benefits for Rumina and the Aru region if she went through with her marriage to Ohru. Her people would be under the aegis of the Magua clan and would pay fewer taxes. Despite this, Aru clan retainers vehemently opposed her upcoming marriage. Losing their clan identity was more important to them than lifting their families out of poverty.

The Aru clan was descended from the ancient Tahsa people. They had agreed to marrying into other clans before as a way to maintain peace, but the clan's proud retainers weren't about to give up their heritage completely without a fight. Rumina understood how they felt, but...

"Rumina!" Kumu shook her shoulder. "Do you really think our people and retainers will be happier just because they increase our seed allotment from the jano?" The jano was a seed pan used to measure out a season's worth of seeds for a region. "They're treating us like they don't respect us. Like we're paupers!"

Rumina said nothing in response.

"Come on, sis, we're not kids anymore! I know our father shamed us by marrying a Rotan and that we suffer under our clan curse, but doesn't that make it our responsibility to make things better? Even if we die impoverished and alone, we will at least die as ourselves."

Rumina's eyebrows drew together. "Is that what you actually believe?" she asked.

Kumu frowned. "Why are you asking?"

"The sheep are bearing fewer young than in past years. The Magua clan's land borders ours, and their flocks continue to increase in size.

Their wheat fields are rich and plentiful, while our fields eke out meager harvests. And the wolf attacks keep getting worse. That's a lot of bad luck, I grant you, but do you really think it all happened because mom married into the Magua clan? Doesn't that seem ridiculous to you?"

When Kumu didn't say anything, Rumina put a note of challenge in her voice. "If that's really what you think, where's your proof? All you have is hate-barbed rumors to back up your view. I'm much older than you; I've heard mother's family slandering the Tahsa people since before you could walk. That doesn't mean that any of what they say is true. What *is* true is that our land is dying. Your groundless beliefs shame our family and our mother, who loved us both."

Kumu gritted his teeth. "They're not just rumors," he spat.

Rumina gripped the armrests of her chair to steady herself.

"It's been almost twenty years since our parents were married. Any curse laid on our clan is sure taking its sweet time to obliterate us." It would be exactly twenty years this year. Rumina hadn't remembered that before.

The night that she'd accepted the terms of the Magua clan's marriage proposal, the family's butler and house servant Agachi pulled her and Kumu aside. There was a secret that they didn't know—that he'd kept for all these long years—and he'd decided to tell them.

"Lord Shisal loved Lady Oria, and it is out of love and respect for them that I have refrained from telling the secret they asked me to safeguard."

Rumina felt a chill go down her spine as she remembered those words. What could her parents possibly have to hide from her?

Agachi was a sensible man who put about much stock in rumors as she did. Because he was habitually honest, the discomfort on his face made Rumina equally uncomfortable. He had to tell her and her brother something—something true—that he didn't want to say. It was a strange tale concerning her mother and the Valley of the Forest King. It wasn't clear what their mother had done, but Agachi didn't seem pleased by it. Kumu guessed that she had cursed their land.

"It's sad to me that you don't remember our mother," Rumina said. "But I knew her very well, and I know she would never seek to harm our land. That would be the same as harming us, and she'd never do that. I don't doubt that mom did something to make the Aru clan retainers suspicious, but they were always going to be suspicious of her. Our father never was. They loved each other and wouldn't betray one another."

Kumu frowned. "I want to believe you, but…"

Rumina reached out and rested a hand on her brother's shoulder. "I know you want to. And you should." Her eyes drifted out the window, taking in the beautiful yellow-orange sunset. Light and shadow shifted together in the tall grass of the fields.

"I hope the voice I heard in my dream wasn't our father's," she said. "I couldn't stand it if it was."

We're heading to the Valley of the Forest King.

The voice had struck her like thunder—like a flash of lightning followed by a shaking of the earth.

"Our parents are no longer with us," Rumina said sadly. "There are so many things I wish I could say to them… I'm sure they didn't tell us everything they wanted to. But it's too late now." Sometimes misfortune was simply misfortune. "If I don't marry Ohru, everything will go from bad to worse. I don't see another way to save us. I'd tell you if I did."

Rumina sighed. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet. "I know mom did her best to support the Aru clan and our domain. What kind of daughter would I be if I didn't try to preserve her efforts in some way?"

Kumu's gaze wavered. He was so young, and looked younger now. "Maybe you're right," he said, "but we have no idea what mom did or didn't do. If dad was here, he'd tell us to fight to the end, and that's what I plan to do."

Rumina looked out the window again. "Well, there's one way to get more information. The Sadan Taram are coming soon. We might ask their leader, Sari, for answers. She might be able to tell us more about what Agachi said."

Kumu tilted his head. "Do you really think she'd tell us, if we asked?"

"I'm sure she will," Rumina said. "All we want is the truth."

It was a good plan, asking the Sadan Taram. For the first time since waking from her nightmare, Rumina's eyes gleamed with the light of hope.

chapter four

mysterious singing voice

Golden fields of wheat rippled in the autumn breeze for as far as the eye could see. The sky was a dim blue color at this early hour, and perfectly clear. In the distance, a high hill rose up from the plains. The Yamashiro Pass connected Rota's road system with the Western Imperial Highway in New Yogo. As the road extended west, it split into two: one road led to Rota's capital city, and the other led to Rakul Province in the far north. The road this far north was so narrow and poorly maintained that it all but vanished into the wheat fields.

Summers were short and hot in Rakul Province, and the winters were long and cold. The soil was rocky and not good for farming crops. The wheat fields were all comprised of hardy, wild grains that took root in the dry soil. Most farmers made a living by ranching sheep and long-furred cows called shiku.

Spring had returned to Nayugu, marking the end of the war, and while Rakul Province was among the poorest in Rota, Nayugu's spring was having some positive effects. Summer had been longer for the past few years, and cattle were more fertile. It wasn't enough to ease the people's burden completely, but it did help a little. Without the added boost from Nayugu's spring, it was likely that the food shortages caused

by the war with Talsh would have led to mass starvation in the province.

Balsa walked through the golden fields with the Sadan Taram. The Sadan Taram never rode horses, so their progress had been relatively slow. There was no convincing them to take on horses, however. For the Sadan Taram, the journey wasn't worth the effort unless they could feel the earth beneath their feet.

Kii was walking out front. Her colorful clothes fluttered in the gentle wind. The bells sewn to her sash jingled with every step. Sansa walked behind her, and Balsa walked behind them both, positioning herself to protect all of her charges.

The leader, Eona, never stayed in one place for long. Sometimes she walked out front, sometimes behind, and sometimes in the middle of the group, as the whim took her. She was restless like a child, and at times it was hard to believe that she was nineteen. She didn't talk as much as the others. Sometimes Balsa caught her eye and she smiled, but they rarely had any reason to speak to each other.

Kii and Sansa liked to pass the time by talking and singing. Balsa noticed that they walked much faster that way than when they were silent.

As they all walked through the tall grass together, Eona put herself at Balsa's side and asked tentatively, "I've noticed that you practice with your spear every morning. Do you ever take a rest day?"

"Why would I? Would resting make me stronger?"

Eona smiled. "Certainly you're strong enough by now."

"I'm the one who decides that," Balsa said. "Maintaining strength, suppleness and form is dependent on daily practice. I've seen you playing that water harp you've got every day, and I've never seen you skip a day, either."

"I practice my harp every day, but I never practice with the true water harp. That's far too precious. I thought you knew." Eona shifted her instrument case. It mussed her shirt a little, so she paused to straighten her collar, then showed Balsa a glimpse of richly embroidered fabric that rested beneath her shirt. A slight bulge over her stomach was wrapped up in that cloth.

"The real water harp is here," Eona said. "I carry it with me always, to protect it."

Balsa's eyes widened from surprise. "It's so tiny. I didn't expect that."

"The instrument doesn't have to be large," Eona said. "It houses a wind spirit. If it looked like any ordinary harp, it would be in danger from theft or breakage, like you saw in the market. Keeping it small is another way to protect it." She looked up at Balsa. "I haven't played it because I still consider it to be my mother's. I've watched her play it before, and she always said we'd travel together someday."

"I take it that you can't just play it like a normal instrument," Balsa said thoughtfully. "Your people are known for laying restless spirits to rest."

Eona nodded. "The water harp can be played on Kemiru Hill, the Valley of the Forest King, and at Yasu Ratol ceremonies where we lead spirits to their rest. Otherwise, it cannot be played."

"I suppose I can guess where we're going, then," Balsa said. The Valley of the Forest King was in Rakul Province.

Eona nodded again, but she appeared somewhat displeased.

Balsa remembered Sari conducting a ceremony for the dead when she was sixteen.

In this ceremony, we cleanse these spirits of the suffering, pain and rage they experienced in life. There is no other way to soothe their all-consuming emotions. Balsa remembered Sari's explanation of the Yasu Radol ceremony with a little frown. At the time, Balsa had understood the spirits well. She still did. There were some experiences she would never forget, and she wouldn't be surprised if she took those memories to her grave.

"I'd like to see you play sometime," Balsa said to Eona.

Eona beamed in response and nodded.

Balsa and the Sadan Taram kept walking through the grass. The road started gaining more definition again. Instead of bare dirt, crushed stone ground under Balsa's boots. A little further on, they came to a large cairn made of mossy stones all piled together.

Suddenly, Kii stopped still and tapped her drum. "Rashal!" she whispered to the others. Rashal were wind spirits. "Do you see them? They are heroes of the Tahsa people—Toran, Yagal, and Nora. They're just there, mounted on their horses." She pointed to the sky.

Eona and the other Sadan Taram moved in between the large stone mounds dotting the grassy plain. Eona jumped for the one that Kii had called Toran, somersaulting through the air and laughing. Then she, Kii and Sansa started singing together.

"Toran, Yagal, Nora! Return your long-lost memories to the earth, and find your place in the heavens!"

The song was brief, but it echoed on the plain. The grass moved violently as if it were being disturbed by an animal, but within a few moments, the grass quieted. The place around the cairns were deserted. People had raised them up to commemorate the dead, but they were considered haunted now, and most people avoided them. This field was a battlefield once, and the Sadan Taram could still sense the many lives that had lost their lives violently here. The people of Rakul Province had largely forgotten the battle, but still felt a terrifying aura radiating from the cairns.

Long ago, when Rota was still called Rotarbal, the shape of the land had been different and many different clans had lived here. It was widely believed that the very first Rotan clans came over the mountains from Kanbal in the north.

Even longer ago—even before the age of Sada Talhamaya, a woman possessed by a bloodthirsty and tyrannical god that united the Tal people and Rota's clans—the Tahsa people lived in Rakul Province, herding sheep and cows and growing grain. They lived peacefully with their neighbors and lived off the land, mostly keeping to themselves. There was no intermarriage between the Tahsa and the fledgling Rotan clans at all until one year when the two peoples decided to hold a shared festival. The festival was held in honor of Hanma, a star goddess.

Hanma was said to be the bride of the God of the Heavens. From spring until fall, she lived on the earth, blessing it with her kindness and warmth so that the plants would grow. But in winter, when demons and

monsters attacked the land, she returned to her husband in the sky for protection, only returning when the danger was past.

The constellations in the sky changed in winter. One of these constellations formed of long straight lines of stars moved closer and closer as the end of the year drew near, so the Tahsa people called it Hanma's Ladder. At the end of harvest season, when the Hanma's Ladder was clearly visible, it was the Tahsa people's custom to hold a festival in Hanma's honor to thank her for her bounty.

To the Rotans, this was a new custom, but a welcome one. It put them on better terms with the Tahsa people. On the night of Hanma's Festival, men and women from the Rotan clans and the Tahsa people were permitted to meet, fall in love and marry.

It's hard to fall in love in a day, even for the young. But a few marriages happened this way. Before long, people started noticing that unions between a Rotan and a Tahsa person often resulted in children with great talent for music or dancing.

Children aren't known for respecting the boundaries of their parents, especially when they are young. Their parents' peoples remained separate, but the children traveled between them, sharing their musical gifts with both their Rotan families and their Tahsa families. Over time, these children and their offspring founded their own tribe, the Tol Asa, which formed the basis for the Sadan Taram people.

The great Rotan general Danah changed relations between the Tahsa people and the Rotan clans forever. Danah managed to unite seven Rotan clans under his banner; he was known as a military genius and was particularly skilled at leading cavalry forces. As he brought

more and more Rotan clans under his banner, Danah started being called a king. Some clans accepted this new title, while others resisted it.

The Tahsa people refused to consider Danah a king and were not subject to his rule. An all-out war between Danah and the Tahsa people would be unprofitable for both sides, so Danah launched a guerrilla campaign, sending soldiers in small groups to harry and weaken the Tahsa people.

The war that followed was long and drawn-out. The Tahsa people were few in number compared to Danah's forces, but their heroes were valiant. Long years passed before the last Tahsa champion suffered defeat. When the war was all but lost, Sada Talhamaya was born: a young woman who unwittingly accepted the power of an insane god. Sada Talhamaya completed Danah's work, wiping out most of the Tahsa people and uniting the Rotan clans. In this way, Sada Talhamaya founded the nation state of Rotarbal.

Danah's grandson Roka survived Sada Talhamaya's purge and met with the leaders of the Tahsa people to propose peace so that they could work against their common enemy. Marriage between the Tahsa people and Rotans were still rare, so Danah proposed equal terms in society and marriage. Pure-blooded Rotans that married the Tahsa would be given an additional rank of honor in their stratified society, and their Tahsa spouse would be conferred the same rank. Pure-blooded Rotans were called Kasal Ah Rota, and the new rank was called Yugi Ah Rota. To Roka, the most important thing was to unite against the threat that Sada Talhamaya presented to both the Tahsa people and the Rotan clans.

The Tahsa people were few and tired of war, blood and mud. They accepted the proposal of an alliance in the hope that it would reduce the number of deaths on their side. But that was not to be. Sada Talhamaya was possessed by an angry, bloodthirsty god that killed everyone who got in her way. For a hundred years, the Tahsa and the Rotan clans clung to life, staying in hiding to avoid being purged in Sada Talhamaya's reign of terror.

When Sada Talhamaya grew old and weakened, the young Rotan lord Kiran killed her and took her place as the ruler of Rotarbal. Unlike Danah, Kiran unified the Rotan clans using diplomacy instead of military might or threats, and by the end of his reign, he was considered a king, and his nation was renamed Rota.

Kiran's reign wasn't completely peaceful. Unrest among the Tahsa people, the Tal, and some lesser clans resulted in minor civil wars that worsened under Kiran's successor. The pure-blooded Rotan supremacists seized power and persecuted all the other clans and peoples living in Rota. The terms of Roka's ancient alliance with the Tahsa people were suppressed and forgotten. The Tal people fled to their forests and the Tahsa people lived in self-imposed exile in the north, so eventually, the supremacists had no one left to fight, and the fires of war died to ashes.

Technically, the Tahsa were still considered an independent people within Rota, but their leaders had taken an oath to the King of Rota. Not an oath of service, but an oath that they would never raise arms against him or the Rotan clans.

It took hundreds of years, but the Tahsa people were gradually assimilated into the other Rotan clans. Now, there were no pure-

blooded Tahsa people left.

During the time of Rotarbal, when the Rotan clans and the Tahsa people were still at war, the Tol Asa people found it impossible to pick a side. They were descended from both and valued both. They could not possibly support any war that tore their families apart.

Tol Asa children were not in a position to be bystanders. Most of them were raised by their mother's family, so they chose to side with their caregivers over their father's family if their parents weren't both from the Tol Asa tribe. The Tol Asa tribe shrank as mixed-race children were snatched up by their Tahsa or Rotan mothers.

In the end, what remained of the Tol Asa tribe retreated to a lonely settlement on the banks of a large freshwater lake. As the Rotans and the Tahsa people continued to kill one another, the Tol Asa sang songs of grief, becoming wanderers. They traveled the world, singing their dirges in times of war and peace, never ceasing. They did this to remind people of the horrors of war, and to purify lands tainted by battles and endless death. The restless spirits of the dead roamed battlefields long after their time, and only the Sadan Taram could give those spirits some measure of peace. The Sadan Taram believed that these restless spirits, when put to rest, transformed into clouds and wind, becoming the guardian spirits of their people.

By identifying spirits lost to warfare, the Sadan Taram gained some part of their memories, including their names. They preserved this information carefully so that it wouldn't be forgotten. When a cairn like the one Balsa, Sansa, Kii and Eona were facing was completely covered in moss from the top to the base, the Sadan Taram considered the spirit within to be at peace. The song they'd just sung was meant to hasten

that process, so that the cairn could return to the earth. Only when that happened would the land be blessed.

Once the Sadan Taram purified a spirit and gained it as a guardian, it traveled with them, just like the wind and clouds, speaking through their songs and tinkling bells. They weren't limited to traveling in Rota; when the Sadan Taram were more numerous, they'd made several excursions to foreign nations as well. There was a battlefield right over the Rota Mountains in New Yogo where many Tahsa people had died. The battlefield was considered unlucky by the people who lived nearby, even though they didn't know why. The borders of nations had shifted over the centuries, and old wars were long forgotten. The Sadan Taram were called to battlefields where their ancestors had died, no matter where those battlefields were.

The New Yogoese saw the Sadan Taram as nothing but simple entertainers. Most Rotans thought of them that way, too. Though the Sadan Taram were profoundly touched by memories of war, they were not called by spirits of those who were not their ancestors. When the Sadan Taram first started making their journeys in the aftermath of terrible wars, they were welcomed by all as mourners for the dead who sang songs in their memory. But after enough time passed and the wars were forgotten, people started seeing the Sadan Taram as more of a nuisance, or as singers who fixated on stale old stories.

Because of their association with death, the Sadan Taram were sometimes asked to hold funerals for the recently deceased. Sometimes they were called on to dance and sing to celebrate the birth of a child in the hopes that the celebration would protect the child from misfortune.

The Sadan Taram preserved the memory of the Tahsa people as that people started to fade. Now that they were almost entirely gone, the Sadan Taram were among the only remaining representatives of that race. That legacy carried a certain sense of pride with it, along with pain and sorrow.

Every half a year or so, the Sadan Taram would send out a small group to visit old battlefields and check on the spirits in their care. It would take a long time to visit every single battlefield, so different groups were assigned to distinct routes to the east and west of their small mountain village. There was only one battlefield that the Sadan Taram visited every single year without fail.

That battlefield was in Rakul Province and was marked by the grave of an ancient Tahsa people lord that had once ruled the Aru domain. His grave was in the Valley of the Forest King. There was a legend among the Sadan Taram that the Tahsa people lord's spirit had granted them the water harp. As thanks, the Sadan Taram visited the Valley of the Forest King every year, performing a ceremony to help ease the passing of the Tahsa lord's spirit. Eventually, it would transform into a guardian spirit for their people.

As Balsa had guessed, Eona and the other Sadan Taram were headed for the Valley of the Forest King. The sun moved across the sky as they traveled. Around sunset, Balsa found a small cave for them to shelter in for the night.

"They day after tomorrow, we'll be able to take hot baths and sleep under clean, warm blankets," Sansa said as the unpacked their supplies. "Kii's bedroll isn't as thick as the rest of ours… what do you think, Kii?

Should we run so that we get there faster? Are you still looking for a bedwarmer?"

Kii grinned, then shrugged at Sansa's gentle teasing. The Sadan Taram didn't marry. They took lovers on occasion, and any children that were born were raised by their community. Kii had taken a lover at a nearby village, though she had no children yet.

"I'm sure I'm not the only one who wants to run. Isn't that right?" Kii said to Eona with a slight smile.

Eona blushed. She, too, had a lover in a different village. Sansa and Kii kept teasing her about him as they prepared dinner inside the cave. They dug a small pit and lined it with stones so the fire wouldn't spread out. Setting a fire among the stones took awhile, but by the time the sun was down, the fire was crackling merrily.

Balsa didn't help make dinner. She sat on a stone, watching the mouth of the cave with her spear clasped firmly in hand. There was a bow at her feet, and arrows sitting next to her on the stone so that they wouldn't get wet on the cave floor. Wet arrows couldn't be used as fire arrows. She listened to the Sadan Taram's idle chatter half-heartedly, focusing most of her attention on looking for wolf tracks outside the cave. She hadn't seen any signs of a wolf population in the area during the day, but it never hurt to be too cautious.

When she'd traveled with Jiguro in the past, bandits were always a greater threat than wolves to the caravans that they guarded. However, packs of wolves were more common in the forests of northern Rota. She wasn't as familiar with this area as she was the more common trade routes, so she was trying to be alert to what might be unfamiliar dangers. She hadn't made a wolf trap in ages. As she searched the

ground for signs of disturbance, she recalled the words of the old Rotan trapper who'd taught her how to make them.

"When a cowherd reaches the age of ten or so, he starts sharing wolf-watching shifts with the others. Ah, I'll never forget it--those cold winter nights spent under the blanket in the freezing winter wind, waiting for the wolves to come." The old trapper had a kindly voice and a twangy accent. "I remember sharing the duty with my brother and cousins. The sheep always panicked when they came in close in the darkness. That was how we knew they were there. It was impossible to see them until they were right up on us.

"A wolf's eyes in the dark shine like fire. Their breath steams into mist. The sheep scream… and it was so cold…"

The memory of the trapper's story was unusually vivid. She didn't know why. She'd killed actual wolves before, but the trapper's story of facing down wolves as a child was more immediate to her. She could remember every word he'd said.

After the fire was built, the Sadan Taram hung a large metal pot over it, mixing together greens they'd gathered along with dried beans, meat, and spices. Balsa's mouth watered.

Kii and Eona added flour to the stew to thicken it, then piled the food onto wooden plates. It was a simple meal made of what they could gather and carry, but simplicity wasn't bad. Because they were usually traveling, the Sadan Taram boasted an impressive knowledge of edible plants in Rota. Balsa set aside her spear and ate. The stars shone like liquid silver in the night sky.

After they ate, Kii buried the fire and handed around sakko, a small fruit around the size of a walnut, for dessert. Sansa made a sweet-

smelling tea, and the women sat around the fire pit, stirring the ashes and speaking of old times. Kii stroked the leather top of her drum as if it were the cheek of a beloved child. When she finished eating, she measured out a beat and tapped the drum lightly, keeping time with her foot. Ta-rah-rah-rah. Ta-rah-rah-rah.

Kii hummed a tune, then began to sing.

'Love me,' whispered the little sparrow.

‘May your love lift me, like the wind.'

The sparrow chirps in my ear, too loud,

desiring love.

Balsa listened, but not very attentively. She got a sudden sick sensation in her gut and realized that she could smell blood. When she'd first met these women, she had been covered in blood: her hair, her skin, her clothes. The wound in her right thigh hurt whenever she took a step.

Balsa wasn't wounded now, but she was remembering the aftermath of the terrible battle she suffered with Jiguro. She'd taken an arrow in her thigh, and her recovery had been long and painful. She'd never forgotten the pain. She'd been covered in blood then, too, and Jiguro had used hide glue to force the wound closed. That glue smelled absolutely terrible.

All at once, Balsa's old memories overtook her in a wave.

chapter five

fight to the death

Balsa could no longer remember every battle she'd been in. There were too many, and the details of them blurred together in her mind: the blood, the screams, her vision going dark as her injuries caught up to her. But the battle where she and Jiguro had nearly died was very clear to her. The caravan they'd been guarding was attacked by bandits who were working with an informant within the caravan. The merchants who didn't manage to flee were all cut down. The traitor survived, as did Balsa and Jiguro, but it was a close thing.

In addition to her and Jiguro, the caravan had hired on other guards. Three of them died in the attack; Balsa remembered seeing their bodies on the ground, unmoving. She never found out what had happened to the other guards.

Lost in her memory, Balsa watched the bandits keep coming in overwhelming numbers. If Balsa and Jiguro didn't flee, they would die.

Balsa caught sight of Jiguro farther ahead of her, holding his own against the bandits in the road. The land sloped gently downhill. Balsa ran to Jiguro without thinking; she only realized later that rushing headlong toward him made her a prime target for the enemy archers.

Suddenly, a piercing pain shot through Balsa's right leg, and it went out from under her. She landed on her back and rolled to her side. There was an arrow sticking out of her right thigh.

She didn't remember much of what happened immediately after that. She remembered praying for Jiguro to save her, and he had, but until that moment, she'd crawled around the battlefield in a haze of sweat and blood.

She'd lost her spear when the archer made her fall. Balsa had nothing but the broken arrow in her hand when the next bandit faced her with his weapon. She got in close before he could strike her and shoved the splintered arrow into his gut.

After that, Balsa was barehanded and injured on a battlefield. She froze again, not sure what to do...

Then her body took over. Sights, sounds, and smells reached her as if through a fog as she dodged opponents and searched the blood-soaked battlefield for a weapon. She found her spear again, but it was too hard for her to carry it and stand at the same time, so she crawled along the ground like a brown bear cub seeking its mother, tripping who she could and rolling to avoid blows.

Balsa's breathing was too loud in her own ears. Her lungs felt like they were on fire, and there was still blood in her eyes from when it had sprayed at her earlier. The spear she was dragging along felt indescribably heavy.

A hand seized Balsa's shoulder and spun her around. A bandit was about to skewer her with his own spear; she brought her weapon up with both arms and used it to protect her stomach. He was so strong that she lost her grip--

--and then another man came up behind her attacker, smacking him across the head with his spear. He was saying something, but Balsa couldn't make out words. She had to look at his mouth to understand him.

"Balsa, it's me!" Jiguro called out.

No one else was moving. She and Jiguro faced one another as she struggled to get her breathing under control.

Jiguro crouched down next to her. "It's over," he said. "It's done."

As the idea that she was finally safe sank in, Balsa's vision went dark at the edges. Jiguro shook her shoulders. "Balsa, stay awake. You can't pass out. Not yet. Pull yourself together!"

The shaking restored Balsa's awareness, but it also hurt. She set her jaw and nodded.

Jiguro placed Balsa's left arm around his neck and helped support her as they walked. The arrow wound in Balsa's leg sent shooting pain through her entire body at every step.

Some of the bandits they passed were still alive, though none of them were in any shape to fight. Balsa and Jiguro kept walking downhill back to the road toward the ravine. That was where the caravan wagons were, but

Jiguro and Balsa walked past the caravan wagons and made their way carefully to the riverbed at the bottom of a ravine.

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The air swirled around Balsa, red and stinking of blood and gore. The Sadan Taram were still singing. Balsa had lost all track of time.

After Jiguro had gotten Balsa to the ravine, they'd been discovered by a group of Sadan Taram. Balsa remembered what Jiguro had said to them, once again lost in memory.

"I'm not hurt," Jiguro said quietly. "This blood belongs to the people who attacked us. My daughter took an arrow in the leg. I don't know how deep the wound is."

The doctor probed the edges of Balsa's wound, making her sit up with a start.

"It's deep, but it's not too bad. I'm not hurt otherwise." Balsa said this, but neither Jiguro nor the doctor reacted. Was her voice that quiet? Balsa forced her eyes open and looked at the doctor.

It was a woman. Balsa hadn't expected that. She looked into the woman's deep brown eyes and felt her curiosity and concern. She was beautiful, with dark hair and pale skin. She held a length of silk in her hand that looked like a bandage: it was all wadded up.

"It's dangerous for you two to be alone in the woods with this injury," the doctor said primly. "But the nearest inn is two days' journey. Hmm..."

The doctor turned and faced several other women standing a little way behind her in the trees. Their clothing was bright and colorful, and they were carrying instruments like flutes and drums. Traveling musicians, maybe?

"We'll stay here tonight, if that's all right," Jiguro said. "Would you prepare a tent for us? We'll pay you for the trouble."

Commotion among the musicians. "We can't stop here. We won't make our concert in Aharan tomorrow if we do." They were all appealing to the doctor, who seemed to be their leader.

Jiguro listened to their complaints, then said, "Leader of the Sadan Taram, please don't concern yourselves with us. Thank you for your consideration. Please be on your way."

"But..."

Jiguro put up his hand so that the woman wouldn't protest. "If you have a little time and resources to spare, I'll pay you for some food and medicine."

The woman narrowed her eyes, then nodded. "Of course we'll give you food and medicine. There's no need to pay us."

Jiguro tried to pay anyway, and the woman's face became stern. "Now, now," she said. "We have a reputation to uphold, good sir. What would people say of us if we charged a man for medicine to tend to his sick daughter?"

The other women nodded; a few smiled.

Jiguro shrugged helplessly. "Well, then. I thank you ladies kindly for your compassion."

More smiles; a few giggles. A manservant fetched supplies for Jiguro and Balsa while the women gathered firewood from the forest. They built a fire and boiled water for a medicinal tea to give to Balsa.

"Fetch more water," the leader/doctor said. "This girl has lost a lot of blood. She needs more water if she's going to feel better."

Jiguro shook his head. "I'll take care of that. You've done more than enough for us. Please be on your way."

"But we--"

"--I'm fine," Balsa said, cutting in before Jiguro could say anything. "I lost some blood, but I won't die. I should be well enough to walk to the river myself by morning."

The woman stared at Balsa for a while with her eyes wide and her head tilted, like she was trying to figure out what Balsa was thinking. She shrugged, then smiled. She gave orders for departure, and she and the other musicians packed their things in a wagon and headed for the road.

Before she left, the woman faced Balsa and Jiguro one last time with a bright smile. "The next time we meet, let's share a full meal and drink together."

Jiguro bowed his head deeply. "Yes. I'll treat you and your musicians to whatever you would like in repayment of your kindness."

Balsa tried to get up and bow, too, but her limbs felt as heavy as lead.

She woman waved to Balsa, bowed, and then followed her companions into the trees. The world around was much more still and quiet with them gone.

"I saw that you broke the arrowhead," Jiguro said. "I have to pull out the shaft now."

Balsa focused her attention on Jiguro. He examined her wound in the light of the fire with a critical expression. "The good news is that it missed the major blood vessels..."

Jiguro made a better tourniquet for Balsa's leg with twine, tying it so tight that it hurt. He gave Balsa alcohol to drink in the hope that it

might dull her senses to the pain. It was so strong that it burned the back of her throat as she swallowed it and kept burning as it went down, spreading heat to her entire body.

"We need something for you to bite," Jiguro muttered.

Balsa's eyes lit on the length of silk that the woman had left next to her bedroll. When it was all wadded up, it would be cleaner and softer than a stick.

Jiguro noticed the silk as well and put it carefully in her mouth. Then he poured all the remaining alcohol in his jug onto Balsa's wound. Balsa writhed and groaned as the agony of disinfection warred with the sharp piercing pain of her injury.

It was difficult to remove the shaft at this stage because she'd broken off the arrowhead before, and her flesh had constricted around the wood. Jiguro tried to yank out what little of the shaft he could grab until sweat stood out on his forehead, but he couldn't budge the splintering wood so much as an inch. He paused often to pour hot water with herbs in it onto her leg to keep the area clean, but Balsa barely noticed. Her perception shrank to include her pain and nothing else. She wept bitter tears more than once before Jiguro finally managed to ease the first piece of the shaft out, then the next, bit by slow bit.

When he was finally done, Jiguro bandaged the wound, and Balsa spat out the wad of silk in her mouth. "You're a butcher."

Jiguro snorted. "You're welcome," he said wearily. "Next time, don't freeze in the middle of a battlefield and get yourself shot."

So Jiguro had been watching her. He'd been watching her the whole time. She glanced down at her bandage, which was nearly soaked

through, and closed her eyes. She really should have guessed that he'd been keeping an eye on her.

Jiguro set up nets in the trees around them like he was planning to catch birds, but Balsa thought he probably had a different purpose. They had to be alert to many threats here. Nets wouldn't kill any enemies that stumbled on their camp, but they would slow them down.

He kept wandering around the camp further and further afield until Balsa couldn't see him anymore. He often left her alone at camp to hunt or gather wood, so she didn't worry at first, but when he was gone for hours, anxiety gnawed at her gut. She was hurt and still needed help. She couldn't defend herself like this. Where had he gone?

Balsa slept fitfully. Every time she awoke, she scanned the trees around the camp looking for Jiguro, but he didn't come back all night. The sun was high in the sky by the time he returned.

He was carrying water in a leather satchel that the musicians had left food in for them the night before. It was completely full of water, and Jiguro sat with her to help her drink it. The water tasted faintly of leather, but was so cool and refreshing that she gulped it down eagerly.

After she'd drunk her fill, Jiguro took up a clean rag and started washing the blood off of her face and hands.

"I can do that," Balsa said irritably.

Jiguro kept cleaning her face as if he hadn't heard her. She tried to take the rag, but she couldn't grip it easily. She glared at Jiguro, showing her displeasure plainly.

She couldn't tell what Jiguro was thinking. His expression was blank and his eyes were on her hands, not her face.

Balsa closed her eyes. She wanted to be better five minutes ago.

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Kii ceased her singing, and the other Sadan Taram started building up the fire again and getting ready for bed. Balsa was no longer so lost in her own thoughts that she couldn't pay attention to her surroundings, but her mind kept drifting back to that terrible day--the day that she'd met the Sadan Taram for the first time.

These people are nothing but a nuisance, she thought. Balsa knew that she was no longer as weak or as impulsive as she'd been as a girl, but the effect of the Sadan Taram's song made her feel like the experience had happened recently.

Balsa smiled bitterly. After that attack, she had found the man who'd betrayed the caravan and tried to take him on one-on-one. He'd laid a trap for her that almost killed her, again--and again, Jiguro had stepped in to save her.

But Jiguro had never seen things that way.

You think you owe me a debt. You don't. Get that ridiculous idea out of your head.

Even though she was a stupid kid who always needed saving, Jiguro never resented her for it. She hadn't understood that until much later in life.

Dad…

Balsa stared into the fire, seeing Jiguro pass her a shelled walnut to eat after she'd nearly died in her stupid fight against the caravan guard

who'd betrayed them in her mind's eye. She wondered if Jiguro ever had doubts. She'd never asked him about that. She'd asked him about regrets, but growing up was a turbulent experience for her. It never occurred to her teenage self to wonder if he thought of himself as a bad parent, or if he would have done some things differently.

Whenever Balsa was injured, Jiguro would take her to Torogai and Tanda's hut in the mountains until she recovered. A smile tugged at her lips. After nearly dying not once but twice, she and Jiguro had spent the entire spring season there.

Balsa wasn't a woman who liked to rely on other people, but she wasn't stupid. She knew that she owed Torogai and Tanda her life several times over. *What would I do without them?*

What would Jiguro have done? Would either one of them have survived? Balsa didn't want to think about that.

The moon set, leaving the world in total darkness. Sansa and the other Sadan Taram were already asleep and breathing heavily.

It looks like I won't be going home to Tanda this year, Balsa thought regretfully. She'd be connecting with a caravan headed to Toluan after this. Backtracking to Toluan wouldn't give her enough time to cross the mountains before the season changed to winter.

Life is a strange thing. Balsa pondered the nature of her relationships and the arc of her life so far. She was on guard, so she couldn't sleep. As the wind sighed around her, Balsa kept herself awake with thoughts of the past.

part two

long ago

chapter one

strange caravan

Breakfast was tahal, a Rotan spiced pork and vegetable dish. Meat for breakfast was a treat indeed.

"This caravan must be loaded. Is that because the rich merchant's son is coming along?" Balsa whispered to Jiguro. The sweet sauce of the tahal dribbled over her chin.

"Seems so," Jiguro said. "At least we'll be well-fed."

This was the first morning after the caravan's departure. It was being led by a wealthy merchant in a hurry, like so many of them were. Balsa was old enough to know that the real holdups on journeys like this were the wealthy merchants themselves. The caravan guards and workers were up at the crack of dawn to eat breakfast, pack up the tents and get ready to move again, but the caravan leader and the pampered people with him tended to sleep in.

Balsa still couldn't believe they'd gotten tahal for breakfast, including the sauce. It seemed so extravagant and wasteful to her. Most of the time, a Rotan caravan breakfast consisted of a load of hardened, unleavened bam bread dipped in hot tea to make it soft enough to chew. Compared to that, tahal was a feast for the senses: the spices were

exotic and flavorful, the meat was soft and tender, and it was nothing like what she usually ate. It was delicious.

One of the other caravan guards who was sitting across from Balsa and Jiguro at the table smiled at Balsa as she devoured her tahal. "First time eating pork tahal?" he asked.

Balsa nodded and kept eating.

The caravan snorted. "You two are lucky that Arza fell off his horse. Otherwise you wouldn't have gotten his spot."

Arza was another caravan guard who was familiar with the route they were traveling. He would have been the caravan's guide, but he'd suffered an accident, so Jiguro had taken his place. Jiguro knew most of the trade routes in Rota. Arza was out of commission until his broken leg healed.

Balsa did feel fortunate to be eating this breakfast, but the caravan guard's tone annoyed her. Jiguro was no one's replacement. He was a first-class caravan guard and bodyguard. He deserved respect. The caravan should feel lucky to have him along, not the other way around.

Even as she ate, Balsa felt a strange sense of unease, like she and Jiguro didn't belong here. She knew that they did, but other people were treating them like they didn't.

After breakfast, Balsa went on patrol with the caravan's eight other guards. When she and Jiguro had first arrived at the caravan, she'd thought that they would only be traveling with one rich merchant, but they were traveling with three, so they'd all bought their own guards. A caravan this size with eight guards--nine, including her--was as rare as a breakfast of pork tahal. They could probably have gotten away with

hiring half that many. She wondered how the merchants could afford to feed so many guards such rich meals.

It was Balsa's turn to help wash dishes. She lined up behind another guard who would also be assisting with dish duty.

After the caravan departed, Balsa rode up to Jiguro. They were both riding near the front of the caravan. "Dad," she said. "This caravan is… weird."

"How do you mean?" Jiguro asked. His eyes were on the road, scanning for threats.

"I don't think that all the caravan guards that the merchants hired are actually guards."

Jiguro glanced at Balsa. "Where's your evidence for that?"

Balsa tried to explain the unsettling feeling she'd gotten at breakfast to Jiguro. "That man who talked to us should know you by reputation, but if he did, he didn't respect that knowledge. A real guard would have." First-class caravan guards were rare. Any other caravan guard who knew that Jiguro was first-class might express jealousy quietly, but they'd never dare to mock him openly or suggest that he didn't deserve his place in this caravan.

"Their equipment is all shiny and new," Balsa said. "It looks like it hasn't been used before. To me it all looks more like costumes than gear. It would be one thing if just one of the other guards had new gear, but all of the other caravan guards are outfitted like that. The more I think about it all, the stranger it gets."

Balsa remembered now that the other caravan guards hadn't used their knives to cut the meat at breakfast. They'd used wooden utensils

or their hands. That was unusual; every other caravan guard she'd ever met used their knives to eat as a matter of routine, since they were so used to handling the knife as a weapon.

"If they're not guards, who are they?" Jiguro asked Balsa.

"Soldiers," she said. "I think. I thought I saw a symbol on one of the sheaths, but it was put on backwards so that the symbol is hidden. I didn't see it clearly enough to identify it."

Jiguro smiled at her. "I see. It's good to know you've got eyes. Your observations are all correct." He adjusted his grip on the reins and urged his horse to go a little faster, putting more distance between himself and the caravan. Balsa followed him.

"Keep your eyes open," Jiguro whispered to Balsa. "I don't know what threat they represent yet, but being cautious is the right move."

"All right." Balsa fixed her gaze straight ahead as she rode. "I'll be careful."

***

The caravan stopped moving when the sun went down. Workers fed and watered the horses and set up tents for the night. The leader of the caravan approached Jiguro while the tents were being erected.

"You did well guarding the front today," the leader of the caravan said. He was short and slight, but he conveyed an air of quiet dignity. He was past fifty years old and his hair was completely white. It shone like metal when the sunlight caught it.

Jiguro bowed his head slightly, accepting the caravan leader's words. "I'd heard that the road north was getting difficult this year, but we didn't run into any trouble at all today."

"Hm," the caravan leader said. "I suppose there are a lot of merchant caravans on the road to Toluan during the day in this season. Maybe we don't have to worry too much until we reach Toluan."

"You may be right. I think we may be able to reach Yakkal tomorrow if we make good time. I suspect we'll make it even if we do run into a spot of trouble on the road," Jiguro said.

The caravan leader appeared openly relieved. "Thank goodness. I'd love to sleep with a roof over my head." He rubbed his chin. "Say, do you have any familiarity with a place called Mahal Marsh?"

Jiguro nodded. "Yes, I know it."

"How long should it take us to get there from here?"

"A day and a half, but it's in the opposite direction of Yakkal. If you want to rest there tomorrow, we'd have to double back on the road and take a different path to reach it. If Toluan is our goal, then Mahal Marsh is a significant detour."

The caravan leader smiled. "Yes, I know we're in a hurry, but there's a reason I'd like to head for the marsh anyway. My family employs gacchina--fortune-tellers--to advise us in our business. Not everyone believes their words, but I do."

"And what did they say?" Jiguro asked.

"I consulted with a fortune teller about this journey," the caravan leader said. "The fortune-teller wrote down three place names that

could potentially triple or even quintuple our investment if we visit them."

"And one of them is Mahal Marsh, I suppose," Jiguro said. "What are the other two?"

The caravan leader hesitated. He looked Jiguro in the eyes for a long, drawn-out moment before he said, "Kemiru Hill and the Valley of the Mountain King."

Jiguro looked down. "Are you connected to the Tahsa people, sir?"

The caravan leader shook his head. "Nope, I'm about as Rotan as they come. However, my ancestors had a grudge against them, and that's a big part of the reason why my life is the way it is. The fortune-teller told me to go north to the places where the Tahsa people and my ancestors fought to make my fortune. She also advised me to do what I could to lay their restless spirits to rest."

The sun set behind the mountains, leaving the caravan leader's face half in shadow.

"Do you know much about the tragedy of Mahal Marsh?" the caravan leader asked. "It was made into a play. It's an old story about the Tahsa people entering into Rotan lands, pretending to be duck hunters. They killed every Rotan soldier they saw to a man. The fortune teller told me that if we make it to Mahal Marsh by the fifteenth day of this month, on the night of a new moon, and pray for my deceased ancestors, the caravan and I will be blessed with good fortune.

"I am prepared to slow down our progress and get to Toluan later than expected so that we can make stops in Mahal Marsh, Kemiru Hill, and the Valley of the Forest King," the caravan leader added. "All that

matters is that we arrive safely. I don't want my future caravans to be cursed if I ever stop at those places in the future, and the potential gains that my ancestors' blessings could give me are too good to ignore."

A cold wind blew at the sleeves of the caravan leader's coat. He rubbed his chilly hands together. "Can we make it in time? By the night of the fifteenth?"

Jiguro nodded. "Yes, we can. We should arrive at sunset on the fifteenth."

The caravan leader offered Jiguro a sincere smile. "I guess I won't be getting that roof over my head for a few more days. Oh, well. Any suffering now will be worth it later."

The caravan leader excused himself to talk to some other merchants. Balsa tethered her horse to a tree near Jiguro's. "Does he have to ask the other merchants if they'll agree to go where he wants?" she asked.

Jiguro didn't say anything for a long while. He watched the merchants and the soldiers dressed as caravan guards talking outside a large tent. "Balsa," he said, "I want you to guard the rear of the caravan tomorrow."

Balsa nodded. Her horse snorted.

Jiguro had to guard the front of the caravan, but that meant he didn't know what was going on elsewhere. And while the soldiers might be fighters, they weren't guards, so their training was entirely different.

Suddenly, Balsa and Jiguro heard the chiming of a bell. This signaled that dinner was ready and that the guard and worker shifts were about to change.

Balsa followed Jiguro to get food. "I wonder what they'll feed us for supper," she said.

Jiguro smiled and shook his head.

chapter two

tragedy in mahal marsh

By the time the caravan broke camp and found the fork in the road that would take them to Mahal Marsh, it was late afternoon. The marsh was impassable for wagons, so only the caravan leader and a group of guards would accompany him to his final destination. The other merchants made camp, prepared for another meal and moved their inventory around in the wagons to create more space.

"I apologize for the inconvenience," the caravan leader said to the other merchants. "No one really likes sleeping out in the open."

The merchants shrugged off his apology. The only thing that surprised them was that he intended to take all of the caravan's guards with him. He wouldn't leave even a single one to protect the cargo and the other merchants.

"We're close to a guardhouse here, so no one should attack," the caravan leader said. "I'm not overly concerned about being attacked, either, but I might lose my way in the darkness. Any guards who live in this area surely know the legends of this place. What I fear is a danger that I cannot foresee."

Balsa was alarmed at the caravan leader's proposal, but then she looked to Jiguro, who seemed entirely relaxed. She frowned. *What does he think this is, a vacation? We can't just leave the others here, can we?*

This was, without a doubt, the oddest caravan that Balsa had ever traveled with.

***

The side-road that led to Mahal Marsh was in terrible disrepair. The guards and the caravan leaders were skilled riders, but their horses' footing was so bad that they were nearly thrown several times.

One of the soldiers pretending to be a guard pulled up on his reins a little to slow his mount down. "This road sure is awful, huh?" the man asked. He was looking at Balsa.

Balsa nodded. "Yep. Sure is."

"You're a good rider," the man said. "Haven't seen your horse slip even once."

"Thanks," Balsa said. "I'm used to riding on roads that are this bad."

The man's eyebrows shot up. "How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm sixteen."

"Sixteen, huh." The man sighed. "My oldest daughter is the same age as you. She got married last year. I heard just before the caravan left that she gave birth to a little girl." His eyes drifted to Jiguro. "I know you Kanbalese are a fierce lot. I never expected a Kanbalese man to force his daughter into this life. It's impressive."

"It's what I wanted," Balsa said, irritated. "Jiguro never forced me to do a godsdamn thing. I'll ask you not to speak ill of my father in my presence."

The man looked surprised again. "I didn't mean to offend anyone," he said quietly. "Pardon my ignorance. We all know the risks of being a caravan guard, and when I noticed your youth I assumed the worst. It was rude of me." He sighed. "I can't even imagine training my own daughter to do this work." He was looking at Balsa, but he was muttering as if he were talking to himself.

The man fell silent, following behind Balsa at a slight distance. The darkness hid the expression on his face and the cruel light burning in his eyes.

***

The cry of a waterfowl shattered the stillness. Balsa could smell the river downwind of where they were, as well as the faint sulfur smell of rotten eggs. There were dangerous gases in this swamp; Balsa was certain that the one she smelled was nitrous oxide. Building a fire anywhere near here would be extremely dangerous.

It's gonna be a real pain to find a place to camp, Balsa thought. She and Jiguro had gone through the marsh once before with a small caravan that wanted to buy a large quantity of ahara feathers from the trappers that lived nearby. Ahara were water-loving birds that flocked to Mahal Marsh.

Balsa saw a familiar trapper's hut in the distance. One of the trappers came out to meet them and guide them through the rest of the

marsh safely. He knew where the most toxic gases were and could lead them around other hazards, like quicksand. The dangerous gases were called hiru tah, and they'd killed many unwary travelers that weren't fortunate enough to have a guide.

There were no perfectly straight and even paths through Mahal Marsh, but the trappers who caught ahara birds could navigate it better than anyone else. The marsh was surrounded by hills on every side, so there were a few areas of higher elevation along the route. Balsa tried to keep Jiguro in her sight line, but the uneven ground and thick vegetation made that impossible.

Eventually, Balsa and the others emerged from the swamp on top of a slight hill ringed by trees. The view was breathtaking. Starlight sparkled on the waters of the marsh. Trees and high-growing reeds sprang up in all directions. Balsa could still see a few of the guards ahead of her, but Jiguro had already moved out of sight.

The path ahead was marked by a series of flags that meant they were at the edge of the marsh. The flags had probably been white to start with, but the wind, rain and mud had turned them brown. Just ahead, there was a group of unfamiliar people in brightly colored clothing standing in a gap in the vegetation. The reeds and grasses beneath their feet had been tamped down, clearing a larger space to walk.

The people were Sadan Taram.

The guard riding next to Balsa gasped and drew his bow. Jiguro turned around and made a gesture indicating that the Sadan Taram weren't a threat, but the guard still didn't lower his bow.

But then the caravan leader rode up and commanded the guards to draw bows against the Sadan Taram.

Jiguro readied his spear and used it to deflect the first volley of arrows.

"Dad!" Balsa shouted. She wanted to get to him, but before she could move her horse, the man next to her attacked.

"I'm sorry," the guard said. He drew his dagger and leaned across to stab her with it. Balsa had time to deflect the dagger, but the guard shifted his grip and pushed it into her thigh. Pain, white and hot, coursed through Balsa, but she ignored it.

The guard was trying to kick Balsa off her horse. She recognized that as being a common tactic among cavalrymen and whacked the shaft of her spear smartly against his horse's ear.

The horse screamed, reared and threw the guard off. When he landed, Balsa slammed the butt end of her spear into his collarbone, breaking it instantly. The man groaned and rolled, trying to kick Balsa's horse in the stomach. Balsa brought her horse up short and watched the man's momentum carry him downhill.

She was too exposed here: there were too many places for archers and ambushers to hide. Jiguro was being helped by a few of the Sadan Taram who carried bows themselves, but they were outnumbered. They were also standing in the open; more arrows whizzed at them from patches of tall grass and reeds. A woman screamed.

It was impossible to kill all the enemies unless Balsa and Jiguro could see them. Thinking quickly, Balsa rode a little ways away from the thick of the battle, then pulled three arrows from her quiver and tucked

them to her chest. She rummaged through her pack, finding a small jar of kerosene buried underneath some clothes and her leftover bam from dinner. She coated the arrowheads in kerosene, then clicked her spearhead against her horse's tack to create a spark.

It took a few tries, but her first arrowhead caught fire. But the arrow was top-heavy and fell to the ground before she could draw and nock it. The fire was extinguished in the mud.

It took some time to light a second arrow. She sent it flying high above her head, then moved out of the way before it could land. The marsh caught fire and spread in all directions, likely helped along by the toxic and volatile swamp gases.

Balsa fixed her eyes straight ahead toward the top of the hill where Jiguro and the Sadan Taram were still fighting. She hacked her way through vegetation, guiding her horse with her legs. She startled a flock of birds out of hiding during her violent passage.

There was more commotion ahead: the guards attacking Jiguro and the Sadan Taram had noticed that the fire was spreading out. Jiguro was locked in combat with two men. One was a guard, and the other was the leader of the caravan.

Balsa struck out wildly with her spear at the merchant-turned-traitor, making him fall from his horse. "Dad, follow me!" she shouted to Jiguro.

Jiguro made short work of his other attacker, then pulled up on his reins. He nodded to Balsa.

Balsa and Jiguro rode to the edge of the marsh where the flags were, followed by a few Sadan Taram. Balsa jumped off her horse, wincing from the wound in her leg.

"We can carry the injured Sadan Taram away from here," Jiguro said.

Balsa doubted that. Their attackers were a swarming mass, and she was too injured to carry another person. But before she could tell Jiguro that, he pointed to an injured man on the ground.

"You take him and go ahead of me," Jiguro said. "I'll catch up to you." He lifted a large man over his shoulder.

Balsa carried her charge with difficulty. Some of the Sadan Taram tried to help. Running, feeling her wound smart with every step, Balsa caught a glint of water in the middle distance. "There are boats there!" Balsa cried out. "We have to get to them! Hurry!"

The Sadan Taram moved faster. From this distance, Balsa could tell that these boats belonged to the trappers that lived in the swamp. They weren't too far from a trapper's hut, swaying slightly in the shallow water close to the shore.

"Get in, quick!"

The two injured Sadan Taram piled into one boat; Jiguro and Balsa took another. The last Sadan Taram, who appeared to be the youngest, got into a boat by herself.

"Push off!" the leader of the Sadan Taram called out. There were poles near the shore to help the boats get farther into the water. They also assisted with steering. Balsa and the others picked up poles and pushed against the shore, sending their boats adrift.

Traveling away from the battle seemed to take a long time, but no one followed them. When the boats came to rest against another marshy shore, Jiguro, Balsa and the others got out of the boats and looked around. There was still smoke rising from the swamp in the far

distance, and a few soldiers were visible standing on the hill, illuminated by fire. They were so far away that they appeared to be the same size as insects.

"Can we do something to put the fire out?" Balsa asked.

The leader of the Sadan Taram reached out and squeezed Balsa's shoulder. "Don't worry about that. The wind is still now, so it's not spreading. And it looks like it's going to rain soon."

Balsa looked up. Sure enough, there were storm clouds on the horizon.

"We need to get out of here before the fires go out and they come looking for us," the leader of the Sadan Taram said. She turned to Balsa and bowed her head. "Thank you. Without your help, we never would have survived that attack." She had beautiful eyes.

Balsa looked down. "It was nothing. Your people saved my life once, too." She looked toward the hill where the soldiers still stood. "I don't think they'll move tonight. The way back is pretty long, and we took the only boats that were nearby."

The leader of the Sadan Taram nodded. "Yakkal isn't safe for us, even though it's closest. We'll go east. There's a small village called Okal at the edge of the marsh that's hard for most people to find. We can take the boats most of the way there. Kii, tell the boats where we're headed."

The young girl who'd climbed in a boat on her own nodded and tapped a small drum she held, creating a rhythm. To Balsa's surprise, the boats creaked, then echoed the same rhythm that Kii was playing. She blinked.

"Well, that's settled," the Sadan Taram leader said. "The boats can move in the darkness, so I suggest that we treat our injuries first, before we travel further."

The injured woman Balsa had carried had taken an arrow in her shoulder. The man Jiguro had carried had taken another arrow in the gut. Neither wound was fatal, but they were difficult to treat in the dark. It was a new moon, and they only had a thin sliver of red-orange sunlight and the light of the stars to see by.

As the night drew on, the wind picked up, blowing cold over the water. Rain was in the air. Everyone piled back into the boats and started rowing. The Sadan Taram were practiced at it, and rowed in perfect time.

Balsa was impressed at how fast they were moving. She looked to Kii, the young girl who'd drummed out a beat toward the boats.

Kii smirked. "These boats are like our legs in this place. It's easier to navigate on them instead of our feet. I can't tell them where to go, but they can help us keep moving without getting lost."

No one talked about the attack they'd just suffered. When the rain started, no one complained. They kept rowing in silence until a little past dawn, when the three boats came to rest against the eastern edge of the marsh.

chapter three

job requirements

The night that Balsa, Jiguro and the Sadan Taram spent traveling was miserable and rainy. It was hard to get a fire going--the wood was too wet--but after many failed attempts, Balsa and Jiguro managed to light a fire under the shelter of a stone overhang. The Sadan Taram pulled a metal pot, cups and some honey out of their packs and prepared hot tea for everyone.

More Sadan Taram had caught up to them during the night. In addition to Balsa and Jiguro, there were twelve Sadan Taram: six men and six women. They ranged in age from five to fifty years old. The man who'd been wounded by an arrow was around thirty. A middle-aged man accepted his pack and would carry it for him until he was recovered.

Balsa and Jiguro sat close together, drinking tea with the leader of the Sadan Taram. "I must thank you again for your help. My name is Sari, and I am the Conductor of this band of Sadan Taram. Thanks to your efforts, many lives were saved. Thank you." She brought her chin to her chest.

Jiguro shook his head. "You helped us after when you didn't have to. I see no debt between us, but perhaps there will be a time when we can

help one another again." He cleared his throat. "We should introduce ourselves as well. My name is Jiguro, and this is my daughter, Balsa. We work as caravan guards and bodyguards. She's only sixteen, but don't let that fool you. She works as well and as hard as anyone twice her age."

Sari smiled. "Indeed? I didn't realize you were so young. That was quick thinking back in the swamp."

Jiguro was smiling, too. Balsa stared into her tea, puzzled. Jiguro rarely ever smiled.

"You saved me today, too, though it was a one in a million shot of that working." His smile grew wider.

Balsa shifted uncomfortably. Being praised by Sari and Jiguro in quick succession only increased her confusion. "What happened on that hill last night?" Balsa asked. "I couldn't hear anything that was said, if anything. I got there and the other guards were already prepared to attack."

Jiguro smiled. "The caravan leader called out that there were bandits. That's what started the attack."

Sari frowned. "Did the caravan leader mistake us for bandits?" she asked.

"No," Jiguro said. "I told him right away that you were Sadan Taram, and not bandits. He ordered to attack anyway."

"I think they were after you," Balsa said. "When the attack started, the man next to me apologized, then tried to kill me. I think that setting up an ambush was their plain all along."

Balsa looked to Jiguro, then to Sari. "Maybe they're hiding something. Or they think we know something, and they wanted us to take those secrets to the grave."

Balsa's thoughts took a bitter turn as she remembered the feeling of the soldier's collarbone breaking under her spear shaft and the sincere regret in his voice as he'd apologized to her. He hadn't wanted to kill her. She wouldn't have chosen to kill him, either. The emotion she felt when she thought of his death was complicated.

Jiguro faced Sari, then asked, "Is there any reason that man would have to attack you or your people? Do you know him?"

Sari shook her head. So did the Sadan Taram who were sitting nearby. "I've never seen those men before in my life," she said. "Why would they attack us? We have no money and little of value. We're just traveling musicians--what enemies could we possibly have?"

Jiguro scratched at his stubble. "The two of us joined up with a caravan not too long ago. They said they were heading to Toluan, but they turned north, giving some ridiculous excuse. We took the place of a man who was supposed to guide them. All the other caravan guards were soldiers that work for the lord of this province. Does that tell you anything?" he asked. He tapped his chin. "To me, it tells me that you were his true target."

"Why do you say that?"

"He gave me a list of three locations when we turned aside from our previous route: Mahal Marsh, Kemiru Hill, and the Valley of the Forest King. If you hadn't been here today, he would have rushed to the next location, looking for you. The timing he gave was very specific. He wanted to arrive at Mahal Marsh last night, in the darkness of a new

moon. I've heard that that Sadan Taram visit battlefields and grave sites of the Tahsa people to lay restless spirits, and all three places qualify as significant spots for the Tahsa people." He sniffed. "For what it's worth, the caravan leader had a grudge against the Tahsa people. Supposedly some ancestor or another was killed by them."

The Sadan Taram started speaking to one another in hushed voices. Sari gestured for silence. "It is true that we were on our way to Kemiru Hill from here, and that we visit Tahsa sites to give repose to the dead. Everyone, please share your thoughts."

The Sadan Taram took some time to think through who might have a reason to attack them, but no one could think of anyone specific. Kii spoke up, a little timid. "I don't know who would attack us, either, but I have a question. How did that man know where we would be, and when? It doesn't make any sense."

"You're thinking someone betrayed us or something?" a thirty-something woman asked in a severe tone.

"Don't scare her, Sansa," another woman said. "There was no need for anyone to betray us. Our movements aren't secret, and our schedules are fairly regular, since we visit sites on a rotating basis. Rotans don't pay too much attention to us these days, but it's not like we go out of our way to keep our activities a secret."

Sari nodded. "I don't think we have time to sit with the problem. The most likely explanation is that we are being targeted; we can figure out why later. The most important thing to decide is what we do next."

Jiguro shrugged. "My best guess is that they'll regroup and try to ambush you at Kemiru Hill. You never change your visitation schedule, do you?"

The Sadan Taram looked dejectedly at the ground--all except Sari.

"We can't," Sari said quietly. "We lay spirits to rest, and transform them into something else. It's delicate work and cannot be delayed."

"If that's the case, you'll need to be prepared to fight them next time," Jiguro said.

"Us, fight trained soldiers?" Sari asked, her eyes wide. "These are not ordinary bandits, or wolves. We are familiar with those threats. But these men attacked with the intent to kill. We're not equal to such a task."

"We could ask you guys to come along and save us," Kii said, looking at Jiguro and Balsa.

"Don't speak," Sari commanded severely. "Caravan guards work for pay and accept contracts. They have no reason to help us. We're lucky enough they stepped in to help this time."

"Sorry." Kii went pink.

"That said, hiring guards might not be a bad idea," Sari said. "Can I ask for your rank badge?" she asked Jiguro.

Jiguro passed over his first-class rank badge. Sari frowned down at it. "Like I thought, you're first-class. That's well out of our price range… though I suppose I don't know that for sure unless I ask."

"My rate is three meals a day plus thirty copper coins. Balsa earns half the coins and all the meals."

"First-class guards are certainly expensive." There were murmurs of agreement among the Sadan Taram. Kii's eyes went huge and round.

Jiguro chuckled. "Well, lives are expensive. But you helped us out as well. I'd be willing to work for half my usual rate."

Sari shook her head. "You've already saved our lives; there's no need to offer us a discount. Okuri!"

Okuri was a Sadan Taram man. He sat up straight when Sari called him. "Yes?"

"Can we pay forty-five copper coins per day?"

Okuri considered. "We would have to sell a few things--trinkets, food. And all of our earnings for the year would be wiped out if we made such a payment."

"But we could?"

Okuri nodded.

Sari's shoulders set in determination. "All right, then. What does everyone think? This year's earnings to save our lives? I think that's a fair enough trade."

The Sadan Taram consulted among themselves. A woman chosen to speak from among the group said, "I agree that our lives are more important than money. But we would only be hiring two guards. Isn't there a high risk of them being outnumbered and unable to defend us? There's no point in throwing money away."

Jiguro nodded in understanding. "As to that, I have a proposition. You'll give us payment in full at the end of your journey, but you don't need to pay anything up-front. We'll still expect meals."

Balsa's eyes snapped wide open. "What the hell, dad?"

Jiguro looked at her.

"I don't get it," Balsa said. "We're gambling with our livelihood, giving terms like that."

Jiguro thought for a moment, then said, "We're the only guards for miles around, and these people are still in danger. Is abandoning them a better option? They've helped us, too."

Balsa felt a blush creeping into her cheeks. She could understand Jiguro's reasoning. She didn't know if she and Jiguro would be able to fight off all those soldiers to keep the Sadan Taram safe, but she did know that they would be attacked again, for certain. Abandoning people to die was never a good feeling. She still thought the terms he was proposing were crazy, though.

Jiguro looked at Sari. Sari looked at Jiguro. No one spoke.

Then Sari smiled. "I thank you for your consideration to us so far, and accept the terms of your employment. I would like to hire both of you."

chapter four

jitan at dawn

Gold-plated juggling sticks reflected the bright light of the sun as they were thrown up and down in dizzying, complex patterns. The insides of the sticks were hollow so that small bells could be added. Every movement the juggler made was accompanied by the gentle ringing of bells.

"Sadan Taram! Sadan Taram! Make way!" Sansa called out in a bright, clear voice. "Behold these golden instruments, which banish evil and lighten the load of grief-laden spirits."

They were walking down the wide main street of a village. Several people heard Sansa's voice and turned to look. Three of the younger Sadan Taram women were juggling the gold-plated sticks, singing a song in time with the rhythm the bells set. A few children pointed and giggled. The more curious onlookers came closer. The other Sadan Taram smiled, encouraging people to approach.

This is an absolute nightmare, Balsa thought. She was standing a little behind the performers and was uncomfortable with all the attention they were attracting. At the end of the performance, Balsa looked toward Kii, who tossed her a juggling stick. Balsa stopped it in midair with her spear, sending it upwards. Kii laughed.

Pleased with this reaction, Balsa kept manipulating the juggling stick with her spear and her feet, creating an impromptu dance that delighted Kii and the crowd. When she was done messing around, she handed the juggling stick back to Kii.

Kii was still smiling. "You could be a Sadan Taram if you wanted," she said quietly.

The other women got up and prepared to resume their performance. Apparently, they'd only been taking a break.

"Behold these golden instruments, which banish evil and lighten the load of grief-laden spirits!" Sansa called out again. "They bring wealth and happiness. Men, women and children delight when they dance in the sky!"

Kii broke away from the others and sang a little song, hopping from foot to foot.

Jump, jump, little sheep!

Jump for the short stalk of grain!

Jump, jump, little sheep!

Jump for the tall stalk of grain!

When the other Sadan Taram women finished their song, they clapped to the beat of Kii's and started singing along. "Hello, one and all! We wish you well on this fine summer day!" Sari called out from behind the others. Her voice was so loud that it startled a few people.

Balsa gaped at her. The voice she cast to the crowd sounded different from her normal speaking voice. Somehow, she was scattering

brightly colored flower petals around herself as she moved, though Balsa didn't notice her hands working. None of the other Sadan Taram were scattering petals, either.

It was the season for white ratalia flowers, and Balsa noticed yellow rasshi petals, too. The Sadan Taram must have picked them along the road as they traveled.

Balsa, Jiguro and the Sadan Taram passed through town. It was early summer in northern Rota. The season for flowers growing and blooming was unusually short here.

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As they were passing through Jitan, Sari had an idea that she decided to run past Jiguro. It was impossible for the Sadan Taram to change their visitation schedule for sacred sites, but it was possible for them to alter their route. They usually took shortcuts through the woods or mountains, but since they were in danger now, it made more sense to keep to well-traveled routes. Well-traveled meant more people, which meant more witnesses if the caravan leaders and his soldiers attacked again.

Jitan, where they were, was a large city, but they were heading to Rakul Province and the Aru domain, which were sparsely populated. An attack further north was more likely no matter what route they chose, but they could at least try to stay on the road as much as possible.

Jiguro agreed with this reasoning, but it was still important to find out why the Sadan Taram were being targeted, and by whom. Soldiers

didn't sign on to just any caravan, and he suspected that the caravan leader had lied about who he was.

Fortunately, Jitan was a good place to buy information along with everything else. He tasked Balsa with protecting the Sadan Taram, then went into the city to talk to a few purveyors of secrets.

That night, after the Sadan Taram went to sleep at the inn they'd chosen, Balsa went from tavern to tavern, searching for Jiguro. She caught sight of him drinking across from a man smoking a taju cigar and muscled her way over. The smoker was red-faced and very drunk, so with a little coaxing, Balsa got him to leave. She sat in the drunk man's vacated chair. It was still warm from his body heat.

Balsa reached for a full drink on the table and felt Jiguro's hand close over hers. "You're not drinking tonight," Jiguro said. "No one wants to hear you sing."

"I sang *one* time," Balsa muttered.

He moved a jug of wine out of Balsa's reach, then moved the cup in front of her to his side of the table. His cheeks were slightly flushed. His eyes were alert, but Balsa knew he was more drunk than he let on. "Are you all right?"

Jiguro waved his hand dismissively. "Is everyone safe at the inn?" he asked.

"Yeah," Balsa said. "I left Okuri to keep watch. He should be up when we get back. If you won't let me have wine, can I at least order some fruit juice?"

"Sure, I'll pay for that."

Balsa signaled to a waitress and order a spiced fruit juice called harah.

"Is that Jiguro I see?" a woman called out from a corner of the tavern. Her voice was high-pitched and almost girlish. "And ordering fruit juice, of all things? Are you losing your alcohol tolerance as you age?"

The woman's voice was shrill enough to cause a faint ringing echo. She sauntered over to their table and leaned down, staring at Jiguro. Balsa plugged her ears.

"Don't you dare plug your ears, you saucy girl," she said. She picked up the wine jug at the table and poured herself a glass. Swirling the wine in her hand, she said, "I hear you're looking for a few friends around here. I'm willing to tell you everything I know, if you're willing to pay for the privilege."

"And why would I do that?" Jiguro asked.

"Aw, you haven't heard of me?" the woman pouted. "My name's Kaina." She looked at Balsa. "That's *Miss* Kaina to you. And I know damn near everything that goes on in this town."

"Do you have to talk so loud?" Balsa asked. Her hands twitched around her ears.

Kaina frowned at Balsa severely, then pulled up a chair next to Jiguro. "You're raising your daughter wrong," she said. But she was speaking more quietly now.

Jiguro grimaced. "Seems like you're the one I'm here to see. Sorry if my daughter offended you."

Kaina's eyes lit up. "I thought that might be the case. What kind of intel are you looking for?"

"We're working as guards for the Sadan Taram. They've been targeted by some shady people, but we don't know why. Know anything about that?"

Balsa pursed her lips. She wouldn't have come right out and said it like that. If Kaina traded in information, she could use what he'd just told her and sell it to someone else, including their enemies.

"The Sadan Taram? Traveling musicians with no money or possessions to speak of? Yeah, anyone targeting them is bound to be an oddball. But why do you ask? They certainly can't afford to pay for your services. Or has a pretty one turned your head?"

Jiguro hmphed. "Refrain from commenting on me unnecessarily or I won't pay for any information even if you have it."

Kaina ran her fingers through her long black hair in what looked like a nervous gesture. "I'll try. Hazard of the business. We talk a lot and notice a lot. I like you, so I like to share."

"Then share something useful."

"Where are they headed?"

Jiguro narrowed his eyes. "Tell me everything you know about the Tahsa people and northern Rota."

"Tahsa, huh? Haven't heard a peep out of them in ages; there are so few left. But it's summer, so that means the annual festival is getting set up in Rakul Province. It's always a big to-do. Ranchers from every homestead bring out a head of cattle and present it to their lords as tribute."

Kaina kept talking--and drinking--with Jiguro interjecting the occasional question.

"I've heard they're remodeling the building where the main festival is held," Kaina said. "It's made of wood, of course--those southern lords might be able to afford something fancier, but we're talking about the north. And they're not using just any wood, either. They're using maharan."

Jiguro's eyebrow twitched. "I see."

Maharan was a luxury material, especially by the standards of northern Rota. Its wood grain was almost perfectly straight and even. The wood was strong, water-resistant and made good building material. The bark could be used to make some kinds of perfume. The maharan tree didn't grow anywhere in the north, so the materials to upgrade the festival space were imported at great additional expense.

This was a widespread rumor. Balsa had heard it before, but she didn't really understand why it mattered. The ins and outs of commerce and why wood moved to one area of a country instead of another all seemed very dull and pointless to her, but Jiguro's questions and Kaina's commentary helped her put this information into new perspective.

A trade of this magnitude would have to be authorized by a northern Rotan clan lord, who would also have to sign off on the expense. Northern Rota was much poorer than the south, and when people learned about the maharan trade deal, it sparked unrest, especially among those who were struggling to feed themselves and their families.

"A purchase that large would send taxes in the province up by double digits," Jiguro said. "How can the people afford it?"

"They can't, and it's all anyone can talk about. The blame for it all is going to the Magua clan, and they're expected to pick up the tab." Kaina's eyes brightened suddenly from drink or emotion; Balsa couldn't tell which. "You mentioned the Tahsa people. As it turns out, I just might know something..."

Kaina smiled. "But it'll cost ya. You know much about liquor? This place sells araku."

Jiguro snorted. "How much do you want?"

"A silver coin's worth."

As Balsa looked on, Jiguro dug a silver coin out of his pocket and pressed it to Kaina's palm.

"Thanks," Kaina said. She took another swallow of wine. She leaned over the table and spoke in a low voice. "Say... d'you know about the Tahsa people who live in Aru region? Like I said before, there aren't many left, but that used to be where a bunch of them lived, and some are still there."

"I know the basics," Jiguro said. "The Aru region is where one of the more powerful Tahsa lords lived a long time ago. They rule over the northern forests that includes the Valley of the Forest King."

"You're right; that's the basics." Kaina took another drink. "What you might not know is that the Tahsa people has been dying out, and the few that are left have been consumed by radicalism and bigotry against the Rotans. The poor people of the north aren't the only ones on the edge of rebellion at the moment. And the maharan tree is sacred to

the Tahsa people, so cutting so many of the trees down hasn't helped matters.

"But anyway, the Magua clan are trying to make nice with those Tahsa people. Do you know why?" She raised an eyebrow. "Apparently they've managed to get maharan to grow there, finally. And found some old-growth groves in the more remote forests."

"The Aru region will be as rich as the stars soon, then," Jiguro said.

Kaina nodded. "All the maharan imported this year had to come from far away. If the Magua clan could source it from the north, the quality and freshness of the wood would be even better. And it's also a profitable material to export."

Jiguro and Kaina kept talking for a while, but their conversation went in circles. Jiguro set his glass down with a bit more force than was necessary and said, "Stop boring me with your absurdities and tell me something I can actually use."

Kaina laughed. "That's all the information I'll give you for one silver piece. Well, no, there's one other thing. Two years ago, the lord of the Aru region fell in love with a woman from the Magua clan--a pure-blooded Rotan. Their parents opposed the match, but against all odds, they married last year. Isn't that remarkable? It's like something out of a storybook."

"This is useful?" Jiguro asked.

"The Magua clan had only one daughter to marry off, so it's a loss for them. They're also the ones insuring the purchase of the maharan wood and putting up collateral. That's all the major goings-on in Rakul

Province that I know of. I hope the information helps your Sadan Taram friends."

Jiguro poured Kaina another glass of wine. "I should have expected you to keep the best information you had for last. You know your business."

Kaina drained her glass in a single gulp. "Ah, that's the good stuff."

Jiguro got up from his chair, using Kaina's shoulder for support as he steadied his feet. He'd drunk far more than he usually did. "Let's call it a night," he said. He put the money to pay for their drinks on the table, then gestured to Balsa. They were on their way out the door when Kaina called them back.

"Say, how long are you in town?" Kaina asked.

"Not sure," Jiguro said. "Does it matter?"

"Not really." Kaina shrugged. "Farewell. And come back again so that I can drink you under the table." She staggered to her feet, picked up the table's half-empty wine jug, and sauntered over to another table.

Jiguro spared Kaina one last glance. Then Balsa and Jiguro left the tavern as quickly as possible. Balsa had trouble keeping up. The touch of the clear, cool night air after being cooped up in the tavern for so long was refreshing. The stars glittered in the sky overhead.

"Is something wrong?" Balsa asked.

"No," Jiguro said. "Go back to the inn before me. Tell them I'm buying a hangover cure or something, if they ask." He walked off, completely steady on his feet, and Balsa wondered if he's amplified his own drunkenness for Kaina's benefit.

She wanted to get back to the inn, but she also had no idea what Kaina's information was worth. When Jiguro was out of sight, she returned to the tavern and waved to Kaina, who was sitting at a different table.

"Oh, back so soon?" Kaina asked.

"I want to understand what you were saying before. You didn't make any sense."

Kaina laughed. "Well, if that's what you want, you'll have to pay for it."

"How much do you want?"

"Hm, thirty copper coins."

Balsa counted out the money and passed it to Kaina.

Kaina accepted the money with a little grin. "Pleasure doing business. Truth is, a man Jiguro is looking for is in Jitan at the moment. A Kanbalese man carrying a spear. He's been asking around for Jiguro, you see."

Balsa's blood turned to ice. A Kanbalese warrior--a King's Spear? Here? "Where is he?"

"He's staying at an inn near the eastern canal," Kaina said. "That's all that thirty copper coins will get you." She turned away, talking to a man across the table.

Balsa seized Kaina's arm. Kaina turned back to her with an expression of irritation. "What now?"

"I don't want you betraying what you know about us to other people."

Kaina shrugged. "What I do with my information is my own business. Certainly not yours."

"If you do sell us out, I'll kill you," Balsa said in a low voice. Then she turned her back on Kaina.

***

Balsa tracked down the Kanbalese warrior to the inn near the eastern canal. It was a cheap place, and small; the only place available for guests was above the kitchen. In winter, the fires from the kitchen warmed the small rooms there, but summers were unbearably hot. The rooms were so cheap in summer that even the very poorest travelers could rent them.

Staring up at a window covered by a length of dirty cloth, Balsa waited. When no one appeared, she called out, "If there's a Kanbalese warrior here, show yourself!"

The cloth moved away from the window. It was a little before dawn and difficult to see. Balsa gripped her spear and peered upwards.

"What do you want of me?" a man asked in Kanbalese.

Balsa hadn't heard Kanbalese for a long time. His accent was a little different from her and Jiguro's, but she still missed hearing the language of her childhood home.

"I have some information about the people you're looking for," Balsa said. "If you want to know about them, follow me." Then she turned her back and started walking.

A few moments later, Balsa heard the door of the inn close, then measured footsteps following after her. His leather boots scuffed the street as she walked ahead of him. Her heartbeat was loud in her ears. She had to deal with this man before he found out that she and Jiguro were being employed by the Sadan Taram.

I'm not a kid anymore. I can handle this.

Balsa didn't want Jiguro to be forced to kill any more of his friends. That was a burden she'd happily accept for him. She led him out of the city and onto the plains outside, near the shores of a small lake. Finally, she stopped and turned to face him.

The man was around Jiguro's age, carrying a spear. He was tall and hale, prepared to fight, though not hostile. He looked her up and down, then asked, "Who are you?"

He looked like a King's Spear.

"I'm…" She hesitated, then swallowed. "I'm Balsa. Jiguro Musa's daughter."

The man's eyes went wide.

Balsa unsheathed her spear and assumed a ready stance. "You're after us, aren't you? Him and me. Well, I'm your opponent."

The man unsheathed his own spear, but it didn't seem like he wanted to fight. Grief and anger intermingled in his eyes as Balsa struck out with her spear. He caught it against hers, then shoved her down, moving faster than the eye could see. She struggled to get up, but his spear was there, cold and forbidding.

She lost all sense of time until Jiguro's voice shattered the silence.

"Balsa!"

Jiguro was red-faced and out of breath. He looked between the Kanbalese warrior and Balsa with a deep frown. "So… Narook, then?"

No one moved for a tense moment.

"Narook," Jiguro said. "I'm on a job at the moment, but it'll be over soon. I swear that the moment it is done, I'll return here and cross spears with you."

Narook didn't say anything. Then he shook out his shoulders. "I have taken the oath that binds what I hear and what I speak. I cannot listen to the words of an exile and an outlaw."

Jiguro closed his eyes. His own spear was clasped in his fist. "I see. Then this shall be our final battle on this earth."

Balsa glanced between Jiguro and Narook and realized that Narook was crying. Tears fell from his eyes onto the street.

Sari dashed up the street and grabbed Balsa's arm. "What's going on?" The other Sadan Taram were following behind her more slowly. "A woman named Kaina came to the inn and told us to come, so we came."

The brief distraction gave Narook an opening to lunge. The tip of his spear slashed Jiguro's throat. At the same instant, Jiguro buried his spear in Narook's neck, so deep that blood fountained everywhere. Narook fell, and Jiguro continued digging his spear into his neck so that Narook's blood splashed all over his face.

Narook's spear fell from his spasming hands. Jiguro cast his spear aside and picked Narook up, holding him until he stopped moving and it was clear that he was dead. He stayed still for a very long time.

When Jiguro finally looked up, his wound was no longer gushing. "Forgive me," he forced out hoarsely, "but I have to bury this man. I

need a shovel, and to find a plot of land outside town. It should only take me a few hours."

"You're bleeding," Sari said, eyes wide with concern. She knelt down next to Jiguro and handed him a clean rag, which he pressed to his throat. Balsa moved to Jiguro's side as well, and was stunned when he turned and punched her in the face.

Balsa hit the ground and rolled, and for a second she felt like she couldn't move. The smell of blood overwhelmed her, nauseating, as it streamed from her nose.

"Do you really think you were ready to take on Narook as an opponent?" Jiguro asked quietly.

Balsa got up onto her hands and knees and didn't look at him.

"Never do anything so stupid again," Jiguro spat like a curse. He turned away from Balsa and didn't face her again for the rest of the night.

***

Jiguro's wound was more serious than it had appeared at first. He spent a few days under the care of a physician before he was well enough to resume the journey with the Sadan Taram. He didn't charge the Sadan Taram for the days he was undergoing treatment, since he couldn't guard them adequately. Sari didn't mind paying the usual rate while Jiguro recovered, but Jiguro refused to accept any offered payment.

***

Later that night, after they all returned to the inn, Balsa verified that all the Sadan Taram were sitting together, then went outside to the well to wash her face and hands. The moonlight reflected off the water's surface. She remembered Jiguro hitting her and telling her she wasn't fit to fight Narook. He hadn't looked her in the eye since.

Balsa understood why Jiguro had hit her. His reasoning hurt her worse than the blow itself had, but she understood it. She wished that he'd simply explained himself instead of hitting her. She was young and impatient and angry: Jiguro knew that as well as anyone, but he wasn't about to make excuses for her.

Yes, Balsa understood, but it galled her. She didn't want Jiguro to be angry at her, and she was mad at him herself for overreacting like that. The right thing to do would be to reconcile, but Balsa wasn't sure how. Confronting Narook had been wrong on her part—she could still remember the tears in his eyes and his face setting in deep-carved lines after he died. She remembered Jiguro holding his emotions in, but she could easily guess what he was feeling.

Yesterday, Narook had taken lodgings at a cheap inn inside Jitan. Now he was buried in an unmarked grave outside of the city. Balsa was stunned by that—by the idea that a life could be so quickly ended. Snuffed out like a candle. She wished that the last day could be a dream, and that she could wake up and do it all over again. She wondered if Jiguro wished for the same thing. He probably did. No one wanted to kill their own friend—much less over and over again.

This wasn't a nightmare, but that was what it should be.

***

Balsa awoke in the darkness to the sound of footsteps. Someone was standing over her, looking down. She reached for her spear.

"Are you all right?" Kii asked quietly. "I never thought he'd hit you. It must come as quite a shock.

Balsa sat up. There was faint light coming through her room's window, so she could just make out Kii's face.

"I'm fine," Balsa muttered. "It's nothing serious."

Kii frowned. "If he'd wanted to reprimand you, he could have done it with an open palm. That would have harmed you far less."

Balsa sat up. She could use a drink of water. "He's hit me like that since I was a kid. I'm used to it." There was no self-pity in her tone; she wanted Kii to understand that this was a regular occurrence. "Our lives are much different. If I wasn't used to some level of violence, I'd never be able to protect myself or others. Or to kill."

For people unused to violence, being struck by someone else was a terrifying prospect. Jiguro had told her that without proper physical conditioning, she might be rendered unconscious by a single strike. That was why he'd hit her so often—not to punish her, but as part of combat training, to make her stronger. He hadn't wanted to do it, either—often, she saw him gritting his teeth and looking away during that stage of training. That saddened her. Balsa herself found it difficult to strike out at people her own age or younger, even if they'd made themselves her enemies.

Still, Jiguro was committed to teaching Balsa to defend herself, and that meant she had to be ready for any potential threat. If Balsa lost her life during a battle, all that training and preparation would be for nothing.

Balsa glanced up at Kii. "Jiguro… was afraid."

Kii knelt down and wiped dried blood from Balsa's face with a clean cloth.

"That man—he could have killed me. That's why Jiguro was scared." He'd been sweating—completely out of breath—and the light in his eyes wasn't caused by rage, but terror. What would have happened if he'd come too late?

Kii nodded. "You're probably right. He looked panicked when he ran after that Kaina woman. I've never seen him look like that before."

Balsa closed her eyes. Yes, that was it. Jiguro had been terrified of losing her. After he'd made sure she was all right, that terror had transformed instantly to anger, because Balsa had put herself in danger. But Balsa didn't think that was all there was to it. Jiguro had killed another friend, because of her. Every time he looked at her, he saw the death of those friends in her face.

Kii was still crouched down next to Balsa. She didn't open her eyes. "That man you saw—he wasn't your enemy. He wasn't after you."

"How can you be sure?" Kii asked.

"Because Jiguro knew him," Balsa said. "We have… a secret." Narook and the other King's Spears were trying to kill her and Jiguro, not because of anything they'd done, but because the King of Kanbal was corrupt. It didn't matter where she and Jiguro ran, or that they hadn't

caused Kanbal any trouble in years: their enemies were waiting around every corner, and they'd never stop searching. Balsa's father was dead because of the same corruption: King Rogsam of Kanbal had murdered him. Balsa's future—all her choices—had been taken from her when she was six years old, and Jiguro's life was plunged into unending darkness.

Sari knocked on the door of Balsa's room, then stuck her head in. "I, um," she said, "I was thinking we could hold a ceremony for the dead man. To put his spirit to rest."

Kii nodded. "I think we should." She looked to Balsa. "What do you think? Isn't that a good idea? You could—" Kii noticed Balsa's shadowed expression and swallowed down her words.

There were tears at the corners of Balsa's eyes. She wiped them away, then stood up slowly. "Jiguro might want to go to a funeral for him. I'd prefer not to." It was her fault that Narook had died today, but it wasn't her fault that he was dead. That blame belonged to himself, and the king standing behind him, giving him orders.

"Why don't you wish to come?" Sari asked.

"I've never seen a spirit," Balsa said. "I don't know if they exist, or if they can be put to rest or anything. And I don't care. All I know is, that man came to kill me and Jiguro, and he would have done it if Jiguro hadn't killed him first. There's no point in me hoping that his spirit is at rest or whatever."

Sari shook her head. "That's not—I mean, laying a spirit to rest, it's different. The ceremony isn't only for the spirit of the person who died."

"I get that," Balsa said. "If you want to hold that ceremony so that Jiguro will feel better, do it. Just leave me out of it. I have no reason to grieve for a rotten bastard who wanted to kill me."

Sari and Kii glanced at one another, silent. The faint light coming from outside Balsa's window flickered and went out; the inn's workers were putting out the lights for the night.

Sari sighed. "You know, you and Jiguro are very much alike—gruff, and stubborn. It's all right, sometimes, to live freely, like the wind blowing through the grass. If you spend your entire life like a wild pig, fleeing from danger to danger without rest, well… can you really call that living at all?"

Kii nodded. "Doesn't it… hurt? To live like that all the time?"

Balsa shook her head. "You don't get it. We stop running, we die. It's really as simple as that." She sighed. "Look, I appreciate you trying to be nice and all, but really, this is just another ordinary day. You don't need to worry about me or him. It's our job to protect you, after all."

Sari nodded shallowly. A shaft of moonlight illuminated her face. Her concern was plain to see, but she said nothing.

chapter five

the legend of the water harp

A faint breeze carried the smell of frying bam to Balsa's nose in the early morning. She was already practicing outside, waving her spear around in set forms, then pretending to fight imaginary enemies.

The sound of drums playing in irregular rhythms disrupted Balsa's sense of focus. A few moments later, the drumbeats matched her steps perfectly; it was like the player was treating her practice as a dance. She turned around and saw Kii sitting nearby, warming up and practicing her instrument. "I'm sorry," Kii said. "Am I bothering you?"

"No," Balsa said. "Were my movements that easy to read?" She wasn't sure how she felt about Kii creating a performance around her spear practice.

"You have a rhythm when you fight," Kii said. "It took me a few tries to get it right, but it's obvious for anyone to notice." She played back the rhythm of Balsa's movements, and Balsa felt like she could hear the pattern, too. Strange. "I've tried finding Jiguro's rhythm, but every time I think I've got it down, he changes it." She shrugged.

"Yeah," Balsa said. "I've never been able to anticipate what he'll do enough to beat him."

Balsa caught her breath, then started walking with Kii across the grassy field back to camp. "How long have you been practicing the spear?" Kii asked.

"Since I was ten," Balsa said.

Kii's eyebrows raised. "Well, I guess I beat you then. I've been practicing the drums since I was three."

Balsa laughed. "Is that really something to boast about?"

Kii returned to her tent with her drum. Balsa kept walking into the wooded area near the camp. It was cool in the shade of the green new leaves overhead. Birds twittered and chirped as they awakened. She walked around flies and gnats, watching branches rustle as the Sadan Taram got up and made their own preparations for the day. The camp was far removed from the road, so they hadn't seen any travelers so far. This close to Jitan, it was unlikely that any soldiers would be looking to hunt them down, but it never hurt to be cautious.

Jiguro walked around the camp, surveying the land around and keeping watch. When he was satisfied, he turned and started walking back to his tent. Balsa raised her hand to wave to him, but then thought better of it. Sari waved to Jiguro, then gestured him into a tent so that she could change the bandage on his wound. His throat had been slashed, and if Narook's spear had pierced it even a little deeper, it would have severed his jugular vein and he would have died.

Jiguro stared into space near Sari's shoulder as she wound the fresh bandage around his throat. His eyes didn't focus on anything; for a few

moments, it seemed like he was blind.

Balsa tried to turn and leave, but Jiguro had already noticed her standing near the entrance to the tent.

"Who's there?" Jiguro asked hoarsely.

"Uh, I'm coming in," Balsa said.

Jiguro looked her up and down when she entered. "Why did you come?"

Balsa shrugged. "I didn't want you to have to talk more than necessary."

Sari nodded in agreement. "Too much speaking will cause the wound to close improperly."

Jiguro settled into a more comfortable position, then said, "Balsa, tell Sari what Kaina told you, so I don't have to."

Sari looked over at Balsa. "What? Is there something I should know?"

Balsa set her spear down on the cloth-covered floor of the tent, then took a seat near Jiguro. "Uh, the Magua clan in the Aru region was buying up maharan wood in Jitan to rebuild their festival space." Balsa repeated what she remembered of Jiguro and Kaina's conversation, as best she could.

Sari frowned slightly. "Well, that's all very well and good, but I fail to see what it has to do with the Sadan Taram. The marriage of Lord Shisal and Lady Oria is common knowledge; we travel to the Valley of the Forest King as part of our regular journeys every year, so we're familiar with the general goings-of the Aru region. I've heard that the new

married couple compliments one another well. I hadn't heard about the maharan wood, but commercial matters have little to do with us."

Balsa, Jiguro and Sari thought about what Kaina had said for a long while.

"Uh, I might be wrong, but when I was trying to figure out what Kaina was saying, I remembered something," Balsa said. "The maharan tree—it's sacred to the Tahsa people, right? So in addition to people being mad about increased taxes or whatnot, maybe Tahsa sympathizers are mad about so many of the trees being cut down. If there are a lot of maharan trees in the Valley of the Forest King, you might have issues completing your rituals if there are a lot of outside loggers and merchants in the way. Your presence would interfere with their business, and vice versa."

Sari nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, yes, I can certainly see how that would cause a problem. We have no real enemies, but it's possible that some rich merchant or a noble with a stake in trading for maharan wood might see us as a nuisance." She nodded again. "However, there are no more maharan trees in the Valley of the Forest King than there are in the rest of northern Rota."

Balsa frowned slightly. "Well, I thought I'd understood what's going on, but now we're back to square one."

"Not at all," Sari said. "I suspect that the unrest in the Aru region might be the cause of our own troubles. The last remaining Aru region lord is stubborn, by all accounts, and gives the Magua clan no end of grief. Politics are complicated, and people get caught in the middle all the time. The best we can do is try to keep our heads down and complete our own tasks without angering anyone."

Clinking and footsteps outside the tent, along with the smell of more bam, told Balsa that breakfast was almost ready. Balsa helped Sari finish up treating Jiguro's wound and put away extra bandages and supplies. Before they left the tent, Balsa asked, "What is the Valley of the Forest King like? I've never been there before."

"Well…" Sari considered. "Many consider it a frightening, forbidding kind of place. Anyone who enters it carelessly runs the risk of being cursed." She nodded. "It's known for ravening wolves, like much of northern Rota. Some say that to enter the valley heedlessly invites the wrath of the Forest King, who sends the wolves to tear intruders to pieces."

Balsa looked at Sari, puzzled. "I thought the Sadan Taram visited the Valley of the Forest King every year."

"We do," Sari said. "But we do not enter the valley itself. Only the lord of the Aru region may do that safely." She lifted the flap of the tent, preparing to leave, then looked at Balsa again. "Do you know the legend of the water harp, as my people tell it?"

Balsa looked to Jiguro, who looked to Balsa. Neither of them knew the story.

Sari let the tent flap drop. "Well, then, you should hear it. But it is not a happy story, and it's somewhat long, so we should probably tell it as we're eating." She left the tent; cooking smells wafted inside. Sari waved brightly to everyone. "Good morning!"

Kii, who was sitting near a pile of firewood, glanced over at her. "Conductor? What are you doing out here?"

"Eating breakfast," she said, taking a piece of fried bam from a plate. "And then, I shall tell the legend of the water harp." She picked up a few more pieces of bam for Balsa and Jiguro.

"I dunno that it's the best story to tell in the morning…" Kii mumbled.

Sari ignored her and returned to the tent where Balsa and Jiguro were still sitting. She distributed the bam, resting her own portion on her lap. Then she began her story.

"Long, long ago, when Aru clan of the Tahsa people was still relatively unknown, the Tahsa people and the Magua clan of Rota were embroiled in a terrible war that stained the earth red with blood.

"At the time, there was much strife between pure-blooded Rotans, Kasal Ah Rota, and the Tahsa people, Yugi Ah Rota. The remnants of the Shiul clan and those loyal to Sada Talhamaya struggled to find a place in this new world of constant war. Finally, King Kiran united all of Rota's clans and peoples. The many branchings of all the different ethnic groups joined together on a single tree.

"But among the Tahsa people, there was discontent. Some said that King Kiran favored the pure-blooded Rotans over their own people. The Aru clan of the Tahsa people held the Aru region in the north of Rota; it was their duty to govern and protect it, then as now. While wars ended in other places, in the Aru region, the fighting continued. Corpses were strewn across the land from the border of the province all the way to the Valley of the Forest King."

The moment Sari had begun speaking, all of the other Sadan Taram had fallen silent. Balsa only noticed that now, as she glanced outside the open tent flap. No one was talking except for her. They ate their bam

with butter or honey, keeping very quiet as they listened to her tale. They must know the story—Kii certainly seemed to—so Balsa didn't see much of a reason for them to listen. Maybe they just liked Sari's soothing, pleasant voice.

"The Valley of the Forest King was a battlefield and graveyard both. Armies that fought there were massacred. The Aru clan tried to hold off their enemies and found themselves killed by them, or devoured by wolves, their bodies never buried. The stench of rot was in the air, and death and decay soaked into the earth. The flocks of the Aru clan sickened and died, and the few sheep that survived bore no live young."

Balsa frowned. It was a bright, sunny morning, but Sari's tone cast a gloom over everything. She almost felt like she could smell death on the wind and hear the cries of the dying.

"And to this terrible place, the Tol Asa people came. There was a young girl among them, just twelve years old, who was a wonderful harp player. She played her six-stringed children's harp with all the delicacy and skill of an adult's instrument. She had relatives among both the Tahsa people and the clans of Rota, so her heart was torn as she stepped into the Valley of the Forest King. No matter which side won, her family would die. They were already dying.

"The girl decided to put the spirits of her relatives to rest, but before she could begin the ceremony, a great wolf entered the Valley of the Forest King." Sari took the bam in her lap and lifted it with both hands. "The great wolf and his pack made no sound as they padded through that desolate place. The young girl faced the great wolf and begged to be allowed to end the suffering of her family's spirits.

"A voice resounded from among the trees. ‘Break your harp. The wind blowing through the broken pieces is fitting music to accompany the wails of the dead.'"

Balsa swallowed heavily.

"The girl protested. ‘If my harp is broken, how can I play it? I cannot end the suffering of the spirits without music.'"

"The voice said nothing in response, but the wolves closed in. The girl was not about to abandon the spirits she had come to soothe, so she broke her harp, closed her eyes, and tried to play a song. The sound was abrasive, grating, and out of tune. The wind was called to the hole in the instrument. The girl opened her eyes, looking down at her instrument, which became heavier the more she tried to hold it up. When she ceased playing, the harp played itself—or rather, the wind did. And the sound was like the soothing whisper of water moving over stone."

Sari smiled. "That harp is, of course, the water harp. When the girl ceased her song and returned to her people, she was chosen to lead them. The leader of all the Sadan Taram inherits the harp, as they have for many generations. The only way to enter the Valley of the Forest King safely is to play the harp. The Forest King hears, and keeps danger away while the Sadan Taram soothe the restless spirits of the battlefield."

Sari dipped a piece of her bam in honey and ate it. "The Valley of the Forest King is still quite the sight. It's always dark, whether it's noon or midnight. The white-bleached nanna trees look like gates of bone from a distance. A cold wind blows against you with every step you take. I get goosebumps just thinking about it."

"Have you ever seen a torin?" Kii asked from outside the tent. "They're the spirits of the nanna trees that have died there."

A fifteen- or sixteen-year-old Sadan Taram woman sitting near Kii nodded. "I've seen them before, and you'll probably see at least one this year."

Kii hugged herself: a gesture of self-comfort. "Scary!" she said, ducking her head. "I didn't know it would be so scary…" She looked at Balsa. "I've never gone into the valley, ever. When the Conductor goes in, it looks so cool! But I'd never do it. What if I never came out?"

Sari simply smiled. She dipped a bit of her bam in butter.

"I might be mistaken," Jiguro said hoarsely, "but I thought the Valley of the Forest King was the grave site of some Tahsa hero or other. Not a cursed battlefield."

Everyone was a bit surprised to hear Jiguro speak. Sansa nodded, then said, "One doesn't preclude the other. There is a grave at the center of the valley where the spirit of an ancient Tahsa lord wanders. The Sadan Taram visit the valley to soothe his spirit, and many others."

Sari set aside her bam and took a sip of tea. Then she spoke again. "The hero's name is Lagaro."

"Who's Lagaro?" Balsa asked.

"Lagaro was a lord among the Tahsa people who wanted to make peace with the Magua clan. He's not well-known outside Rakul Province, and even some of his own descendants have forgotten him, but he was considered just and wise when he was alive, and many Rotan warriors revere his memory.

"Lagaro was just a boy when the Sadan Taram girl received the water harp from the Forest King. The sight of battlefields and devastation saddened him just as much as it did her. When he grew up and became the lord of the Aru region, he approached Magua clan representatives and sued for peace. The Magua clan permitted him to come back to their lands for negotiations, but while he was staying in their palace, he took sick and died—from poison or some other cause.

"But Lagaro was well-respected even among his enemies. It is said that the lord of the Magua clan bore his coffin to the grave and paid for the expense of the funeral. The Aru clan was stunned and saddened by Lagaro's sudden death, but when they saw the Magua clan grieving alongside them, they decided to work for the peace that Lagaro had long hoped for. That was the beginning of a period of peace for both sides of that war.

Because of that peace, later Rotan Kings were able to negotiate with the Tahsa people on friendly terms. That's why northern Rota hasn't suffered a civil war in so long." Sari smiled. "Aru clan lords swear their loyalty to Rota's King, just like the other Rotan clan lords do."

Balsa shook bam crumbs from her shirt, then asked, "Why is Lagaro buried in the Valley of the Forest King? That doesn't seem like the best place to bury a hero."

"He was buried there because it was his wish," Sari said. "Some say it was his last request, to be laid to rest on the battlefield that claimed so many of his people's lives, and the Rotans. Even in death, he wanted to be in a place where he could observe the effects of that war—and perhaps, one day, the effects of peace. The woman who received the

water harp from the Forest King guided in his pallbearers and played her song all through his funeral."

Okuri, the Sadan Taram's generalist who handled most of their money, looked at Balsa. "We're headed for Kemiru Hill next, and you can see the grave from there. The hill overlooks the Valley of the Forest King. From above, the place looks blighted—like a hole in the world. It's an awe-inspiring sight."

Kii nodded, then smiled a little. "That's why we go to Kemiru Hill first. Didn't you know that? We have to go there so that we can find our way to the grave. That's the way our legends say to do it."

"I didn't even know who Lagaro was or where he was buried until five minutes ago." She returned Kii's smile, but it looked strained. "I hoped we'd figure out who was after you all by now. The fact that we haven't has me worried."

Kii snorted. "Is that all you were thinking about during that whole long story?"

"It's my job," Balsa said.

One of the cooks sitting near Okuri was staring at Balsa. Balsa felt the young man's eyes on her and faced him. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

The man grinned. "It's nothing. I was just thinking that you're very single-minded and quick-thinking. Like a minnow swimming upstream."

Okuri slapped the man upside the head. "That's not how you compliment a young lady, Gamal. Try to have some respect for yourself."

Balsa's suppressed laugh was almost a giggle. Jiguro settled his hand over his injured throat and laughed into his shoulder where no one would see.

chapter six

love song

Traveling through Rota's fields in summer was fast and easy. The journey by horse would have only taken two or three days, but the Sadan Taram did not use horses, and because they were being pursued, they camped outside and avoided main roads. There was a reason they were called Wind Musicians. When they had to, they could move swiftly and silently as the wind through the grass.

A flame-red bird took to the sky, startled out of a thicket. It had rained last night, but by early morning it had stopped and the sky was now clear. The grassy plain they were traversing was still wet, but the breeze was drying it out by slow degrees, and there was little mud. They came across a flock of sheep grazing; a few young lambs jumped for joy as they chased one another or ran away from their parents in a little game.

"Shahan--that's the white sheep--love to jump," Sari said brightly. She looked to Kii. "Do you know the song?"

Kii nodded, then took up her drum and sang:

Shahan, shahan, little white sheep.

All they ever seem to do

Is jump, sleep and eat!

Gamal was guiding their packhorse from behind; Kii edged toward the front as she sang, step by step. Gamal and some of the others tapped out a rhythm with their feet and sang along with Kii.

Gamal noticed that Balsa wasn't singing. She shrugged at him. She didn't mind listening to the Sadan Taram sing. She was used to it, but didn't want to be pressured into singing herself.

After a while, Sari took the lead, clapping with her hands to set a new beat. She sang a song that Kii had sung before; Balsa knew most of the words.

'Love me,' whispered the little sparrow.

‘May your love lift me, like the wind.'

The sparrow chirps in my ear, too loud,

desiring love.

One day the world will disappear,

but for these too-short summer nights,

let your love lift me, like the wind.

Sari's voice was sweet and high-pitched like a bird singing in the evening. When the song was done, Sari turned to Jiguro and passed him a hand drum and a set of drumsticks.

Jiguro looked down at the instrument for a few seconds like he had no idea what to do with it. Then, to Balsa's great surprise, he sang a song as well.

The cold wind blows
over the Yusa Mountains
under the moon.
I go to the peak,
spear in hand,
step by step.
The world is hidden in white,
swept away by an avalanche.
I go to the peak,
spear in hand,
step by step,
with the season's last flower
held over my heart.

Jiguro wasn't a singer--not like the Sadan Taram were--but his voice carried. The song was a common one in Kanbal; the laborers who came over the mountains to New Yogo for work often sang it when they were missing their sweethearts. The song made Balsa miss their homeland. There were no mountains here.

Sari and Jiguro were out in front of everyone else. Jiguro handed the drum and drumsticks back to Sari, the summer sunlight bathing his shoulders and hers in a soft glow. They talked a little as they walked. Balsa stayed a few steps behind them, feeling a bit sad and excluded.

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The Sadan Taram knew of many hidden places in the wilderness to make camp. The next place they stopped was near a hidden hot spring. It wasn't easy to use--they had to clean out debris that had gathered in the springs and make space for all their belongings--but the effort was worth it for a hot bath.

At night, when it was too dark to see much of anything, the Sadan Taram men and women removed their clothes and got into the hot spring together. It was a beautiful evening: good weather with a washed-clean sky, and the hot water felt wonderful on overheated muscles and irritated skin.

Kii and Sansa always took a long time bathing. Balsa finished, got dressed and decided to return to camp a long time before they did. Balsa decided to check the camp perimeter before going back to her tent; on her way, she noticed a man leaving the hot spring in the middle distance. Judging by his height, it could only be Jiguro.

Balsa heard clapping from the trees. Jiguro walked away from the spring in the direction of the sound. Balsa didn't move any closer; she assumed that, like her, Jiguro was getting ready to return to camp.

But then she saw another person standing in the trees, approaching Jiguro. It was hard to make out the person's face in the dark, but as they walked, moonlight illuminated their face.

It was Sari.

Sari turned away and was hidden behind a tree. There was a sound like a plucked string--was that harp music?

"Our Conductor is over there, isn't she?" Gamal asked. His voice made Balsa jump.

"Uh, I guess so," she said.

"It's the last night of summer." Gamal sighed. "And a beautiful night it is, too."

A faint prickle of unease made Balsa look away from Gamal. "Is Sari married?" she asked.

"None of the Sadan Taram ever marry," Gamal said. "If we fall in love with someone and have a child, the child is raised by all of us. That was how the Tol Asa were, so it's how we are."

"Hm," Balsa said. "What if the other parent--the non-Sadan Taram parent--wants to know their kid? Isn't that a problem?"

Gamal shrugged. "If they care that much, they can travel with us and become a Sadan Taram themselves. There's not really any other choice to make. But outsiders don't join our people very often. Think about it. Everyone knows who we are and what we do. Having a kid is a big commitment even if we stood still and had normal employment; following poor wanderers across the countryside doesn't appeal to most people."

Gamal came closer to Balsa, leaning against a tree. "Well, I don't like to lose out to my sister. If I sang you a song and whispered to you of love, would you listen?"

Balsa's eyes widened. "Sari's your sister?"

Gamal laughed. "That's how you treat a proposal like that? Did you even hear me?" When Balsa didn't say anything, he continued, "Anyway, yeah. Sari and I have the same mother, but different fathers. She's our

leader, and I'm the cook." He smiled self-deprecatingly. "If you wanna know more about her, I could--"

Balsa shook her head and took a step back. "Learn to read the mood, Gamal." She turned on her heel and walked away.

***

The night was warm enough that the Sadan Taram didn't need to build fires before bed. By the time Balsa returned to the camp, most of the Sadan Taram were already asleep. Sansa and Kii were brushing out their wet hair and talking quietly.

While there were no cook fires, there was a small fire at the edge of camp burning herbs to keep away mosquitoes. Balsa passed by that fire and took a few steps into the woods. She found a solid, dry tree root and sat down.

Kii came bounding up to her. "Hi, Balsa! Do you want to sleep in our tent tonight?"

Balsa shook her head. "I have to keep watch over the camp. And even if I didn't, sleeping three to a tent in summer is too hot for me."

"Nonsense," Sansa said. She was also coming closer. "It's not the season for wolf attacks, and there are no people in this trackless wilderness. It's perfectly safe for you to get some rest tonight."

Balsa shook her head. "This place might be deserted, or it might not. It's more dangerous to let your guard down in new places than it is in somewhere familiar and crowded. Keeping watch is what you hired me for. Let me do it and get some sleep."

Kii and Sansa exchanged glances. "You should really take care of yourself better, Balsa," Kii said. "You're always taking care of other people. Don't you resent it? You shouldn't live like that. You're acting..." Kii's eyes went wide. "Jealous? Is that it? Why?"

Balsa snorted. Kii knew nothing about resentment, or jealously. And jealousy wasn't what she was feeling. She was angry at Jiguro for losing sight of their mission and work, which was something he'd never done before. And she was worried about what might happen if Jiguro settled down with Sari or something. The possibility didn't seem likely, but Balsa didn't enjoy being uncertain about the future.

A while later, Balsa pretended to go fetch herbs and firewood, then set up her bedroll a little distance away from the camp. She hugged her spear to her chest and tried to sleep.

***

Nothing changed between Sari and Jiguro after the night they'd spent together. It was easy for Balsa to pretend that it hadn't happened at all. The only change to the camp was that Balsa decided to pitch her tent between Sansa and Kii's from then on. Jiguro had seemed surprised by this sudden change, but after acknowledging it, he shrugged and moved on.

Balsa tried not to treat Sari differently, either. It didn't matter if Jiguro liked her. She didn't have to act like a spoiled child who was afraid of their parent being taken away by a stepparent. She didn't *want* to act like that, even if it was how she felt sometimes.

Sari was always kind to her. Balsa had no reason to hate her. But she resented her, because Sari was a woman that Jiguro could settle down with, if he wanted. He could make a real family with her, and cast Balsa loose or leave her behind.

That won't happen. Balsa only half-believed herself. She was tempted to strike out on her own before anyone asked her to. Making a clean break seemed like the best option. When this job was over, Balsa would pull Jiguro aside and ask if he wanted to stay with them. She'd offer to leave, and say that was what was best for both of them. Maybe Jiguro would listen to her.

Balsa considered her own future--and Jiguro's--as they got on their way that morning. Jiguro walked out in front with his back to her, seeming impossibly far away.

chapter seven

takan's inn

"I don't like the look of those clouds," Sansa muttered.

Balsa nodded. The western sky was dark, and only getting darker. The air carried the smell of rain. They would be in for a storm soon.

It was bad timing. Kemiru Hill was very close now, but they couldn't reach it before the weather worsened. Thunderstorms in northern Rota at this time of year were common, though, so they weren't completely unprepared.

"I can see Takan's Inn!" Gamal called out. He was walking near the front next to Jiguro. He pointed to a building in the distance. "Run! If we start running now, we might beat the rain!"

The other Sadan Taram broke into a run. The poor packhorses pulling the Sadan Taram's wagons shied and started until they were soothed, but then kept pace with the others.

There was a stone road leading all the way to the inn, making it easier to stay together during the sprint. Fat raindrops plopped on the stone street as the Sadan Taram and their guards rushed onward.

Lightning struck a tree in the woods surrounding them. The ground shook as the tree caught fire, sending spiraling smoke into the darkening sky.

"Lightning!" Gamal shouted. "Run faster!"

They were just outside the inn. Balsa saw five buildings: a house, a shed, a barn, a food storage building, and a stable. Jiguro lifted a bar off the door of the main building and called out, "Balsa, leave your spear here! There are no weapons allowed inside!"

Regretfully, Balsa tossed her spear down, then followed him and the other Sadan Taram into the main building. The instant the door closed, rain lashed loudly against the roof. An elderly couple emerged from the top floor of the building to welcome their guests.

"Hello, everyone!" the woman said with a little bow. "Let's get your animals settled in the stable. We have umbrellas here for you to help keep the rain off."

After the horses were fed and cared for, the woman led many Sadan Taram to a shared room so that they could rest. The elderly man, Takan, helped the other Sadan Taram men unpack their luggage. He introduced the woman to Balsa and Jiguro as his wife.

As the Sadan Taram women laid out their bedding, they shook water out of their hair and laughed. "Well, that was a close one!"

Takan's wife came in with a basket full of clean rags so that they could dry themselves off. The women thanked her. When a few men returned from the stable soaked to the skin, they shared the remaining rags with them. Takan stomped his muddy boots in the entryway, making his wife scold him. "Stop making a mess!"

Takan grumbled and looked down, but he removed his boots before coming further inside.

One large interior room contained a table that was long enough for all of the guests to sit and eat together. The room was lit and heated by a fireplace; Takan was adding firewood as Balsa entered. The wind blowing in from outside was unseasonably cold.

"It's good to see you all," Takan said. "When we saw the storm comin', we feared we'd have no guests at all for the next little while."

Sansa wrung out her hair with a rag. "I seem to remember two or three years ago--we ran into a storm on our way here, too. I'm certainly happy to be inside."

Takan's wife nodded. "That was a terrible windstorm, indeed, and you weren't lucky enough to reach us before it hit, then. Looks like your luck's better this year." She shrugged. "Storms are common this time of year. It's the beginning of autumn."

Satisfied with the newly built-up fire, Takan turned away. "Still, you all come every year on the same day. Not sure how you manage it so regularly."

The Sadan Taram took off their sodden boots and shoes and changed into dry clothes. The pounding of rain on the roof was deafening. Balsa looked around, taking in her surroundings.

The main dining area was a rectangular room with a high ceiling supported by four large wooden columns, one at each corner. The walls were made of lacquered-over stone and were smooth to the touch and shiny to look at. Wind couldn't tear through walls like these. Although Gamal and the others called it an inn, to Balsa, this place looked more like a rancher's homestead or a farmhouse built to withstand northern Rota's brutal winters.

It was obvious that Takan and his wife lived on the top floor and rented out the bottom one and their extra rooms on the second floor for guests. Balsa had stayed in places like that before, though never this far north.

Takan warmed his hands by the fire. "How many years has it been since Nakol was born? Eight?" He shook his head. "Time really flies. How is the lad?"

"He's well," Sari said. "His health has always been good, but he's a bit of a scamp. He would have come to greet you, but he wanted to help his aunts and uncles with the unpacking and spent too long outside. I think he caught a cold."

"But it's not serious?" Takan asked.

"No," Sari said. "He should be feeling much better in a day or so."

Takan nodded solemnly. "Health is the most important thing."

Takan's wife introduced herself as Yora. She brought out a large kettle of heated water and passed it around, allowing the Sadan Taram women to pour themselves tea. "Well, then. Let's rest a moment and have a friendly chat. I put raku stew on the stove the moment we saw you coming, but it's not quite dinnertime yet. I have some baked candies to tide you all over, if you like."

The Sadan Taram enjoyed their tea. The candies were filled with jellied fruit. Yora and the Sadan Taram women talked about the events of the past year. The rain and lightning of the storm outside retreated. The inn felt comfortable and safe.

Takan accepted one of the candies, splitting it open and eating only the filling and not the shell. "We haven't seen too many other guests at all this year," he said sadly. "It's not the best location; everyone knows that. The Aru region isn't as prosperous as it used to be." He sighed. "Another year like this, and we might have to think about closing up."

Sari's eyebrows drew together. "Are matters truly so dire?" she asked. "If we did not have your inn to come to in this season, it would be more than an inconvenience."

Yora shook her head. "You're different, dears. You're welcome anytime. Without your visits, the province would be even worse off--the sheep and cows wouldn't give milk or bear young anymore if you stayed away too long. We've been waiting pretty impatiently for you to get here this year," she said.

"Why?" Sari asked. "Is something wrong?"

"The white shahan sheep are sick again," Yora said. "Very sick. And that's not all. There was an earthquake not six months past, at the start of the year, that destroyed dozens of homes and crushed many people to death."

"That's horrible!" Sari said. "We haven't heard of anything happening like that, even in rumors."

Yora nodded. "That's not the worst of it. After the earthquake, people started saying that the Aru domain--and what remains of the Aru clan--is cursed. That's been the gossip around here for months."

Aru clan, Balsa thought. *If this is the Aru domain, then the people who live here might not be Rotan. Are they Tahsa people?*

Takan added another log to the fire. "I guess since travelers haven't been coming this year, the news hasn't spread. It's a shame. Those of us left could really use a helping hand."

"Is that all that's happened?" Sari asked. "Not that it isn't awful, but you both seem so troubled. And why would people believe that the land is cursed? Earthquakes aren't very common, but neither are they rare."

Takan nodded. "Lagaro's grave... during the earthquake, it collapsed and fell apart. There's nothing left of it now. That's why people say

there's a curse. I went up to Kemiru Hill to check myself, and saw the coffin broken. Could be the bones spilled out, too."

Yora looked at Takan disapprovingly, perhaps because he'd chosen to discuss a corpse over tea.

"We want to rebuild it, of course, but there's no safe way to do that without you here," Takan said. "Traveling through the Valley of the Forest King without the Sadan Taram as a guide is impossible."

Sari nodded. "I cannot believe we were not informed. If it's truly been half a year... why did no one tell us? Tending to the spirits of warriors and heroes like Lagaro is our purpose."

Yora nodded. "Perhaps they did send for you, and the message never went through. Or perhaps they didn't. There was a days-long windstorm after the earthquake, and just after, all the shahan sheep in the province started dying. It's been a difficult year for us all. And after *that,* the young menfolk started getting weird ideas in their heads about curses and--"

"Enough," Takan said, interrupting his wife. "Our clan lady has that well in hand. You don't need to go around spreading rumors just as unpleasant as the ones we've already shared with our guests."

Yora nodded reluctantly.

"It doesn't matter anymore if the curse is real or not," Takan said. "You'll go to the Valley of the Forest King and set the grave to rights. Once that's done, the spirit of Lagaro shouldn't be angry with us, if he even was to start with."

"That's right," Yora said. "There's absolutely nothing to worry about now. Come, play us a song. We look forward to hearing your music all

year."

Takan smiled. "Oh, yes! Just the other day, some merchants came by looking for you. They said they'd return and stay at the inn while you were in town."

"Who was this merchant?" Sansa asked, leaning forward.

"I didn't get a name, but according to gossip in town, he was asking around everywhere for the best inn to stay at." Takan's chest puffed out with pride.

Balsa looked over at Jiguro. It was clear from the look on his face that they were thinking the same thing. Sansa seemed to have caught on to the situation, too. Jiguro nodded to her, and she went outside, leaving the other Sadan Taram to their tea and talking.

The first thing Balsa did was retrieve her spear. It was out in the yard close to the barn. She wiped off mud and water, then trudged around the yard, looking for footprints and signs that they'd been followed.

All the footprints she could identify came from the Sadan Taram, her, or Jiguro, but that didn't mean much. Their party numbered over a dozen, and there were so many footprints between the stable and the main building that picking out one particular set would have been difficult even if the ground was level. Cautiously, she looped around each of the inn's buildings, keeping an eye out for intruders or other workers. None appeared.

Balsa heard a harp song drifting into the yard from the inn's main building and frowned. The Sadan Taram certainly made themselves easy to track. The inn itself was made of stone and was fairly defensible,

but it was surrounded on all sides by trees; the forest encroached almost to the front door. Anyone who wanted to hide in the woods and wait for them to come out could do that easily. If Balsa wanted to kill the Sadan Taram, that was what she would do--lie in wait and spring an ambush.

There were no signs of any attackers in the woods. Balsa went inside, rubbing her chilled palms together, and found Jiguro. She pointed to a side-room off the main dining hall where the Sadan Taram were eating stew and playing songs.

"I didn't see any enemies in the woods," Balsa said quietly.

Jiguro nodded. "If they're out there, they'll attack at dawn or dusk--times when it's harder for us to see them. We don't need to worry about them trying to sneak in." That was true. This was northern Rota, so all the inn's windows were small. The windows on the first floor were too small for even a child to squeeze through.

"They might try to poison the water," Balsa said.

Jiguro shrugged. "Perhaps, but it's not sure enough, and they'd kill Takan and Yora that way, too. I don't think they're targets, and neither are we. The Sadan Taram are the ones in danger."

"But the sheep are dying," Balsa said. "Couldn't that be a sign of poisoning?"

"It's a disease, not a poison, and it doesn't pass to humans," Jiguro said. "Shahan sheep are susceptible to diseases. Even if someone were helping their deaths along with poison, there'd be signs of it. Traces of it left behind. The land would be sick from it, not just the sheep."

Balsa nodded in understanding. "They might try fire arrows. The walls are stone, but the roof's not."

"Well, the edging is, and in storm season it'll be hard to make the roof catch fire. I think the likeliest outcome is that they'll try to surround us and drive us out. In that case, I put our odds of winning at fifty-fifty."

Jiguro looked out of one of the small windows at the red-purple evening sky. Kemiru Hill loomed in the distance, majestic like a mountain peak. "Them attacking us is the best case," he said. "Saves us the trouble of hunting them. Or of waiting for them to catch up when we're out in the open."

"I'm sure they're thinking the same thing," Balsa said. She didn't like taking their chances here. It felt too much like being trapped.

Jiguro kept looking out the window at the hill. He didn't say another word.

chapter eight

fire insects

The supper that Yora and Takan provided for them all was a simple meal of fried beef, mutton and milk. The peach-colored crispy skin on the meat sizzled as it was passed around in a large dish. The meat was from male animals that had been fattened up over the season, so it was tasty and tender. A few vegetables had made their way into the pan as well. Sharp lakua cheese made from goat's milk was set to the side, so people could add it to their food or not as they wished.

After the meat was passed around, Yora distributed bam, butter and honey from a basket. Balsa picked up her meat to eat it and was scolded by Yora. "You don't eat it that way." She placed a large green leaf in front of Balsa.

Balsa, confused, looked to the others. Kii sliced her leaf, then used it to wrap the meat, pick it up and take a bite. Balsa imitated her, though it didn't make sense to her for Yora to be so fussy about it. Somehow, the meat had the sweetness of miuri, a fruit jam. The taste must have come from the leaf.

"Tastes good that way, doesn't it?" Kii asked.

"Of course it does," Yora said proudly. "I'd stack my mutton against any other cook's in Rota."

Balsa wondered if Takan and Yora were Tahsa people. They seemed more prideful and competitive than other Rotans she'd met. Maybe that was part of the reason why Rotans had a problem with the Tahsa people.

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After dinner, Takan and Yora heated up some spiced wine for their guests. The Sadan Taram continued their performance, to the delight of the innkeepers. By the time the Sadan Taram went to their rooms to sleep, it was the middle of the night.

"Well, can't do that too often anymore," Sansa said wearily as she stretched out. This room had eight beds set up on low platforms, all lined up along the same wall as a fireplace. There was space in the room for more bedrolls and futons.

"It's so cold," Kii complained, hands trembling as she stretched them out over the fire.

Balsa looked over the room and added wood to the fire. Then she heard a noise coming from the other room. She knocked on the door and said, "Jiguro?"

Jiguro opened the door immediately. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Sansa was behind Balsa, looking concerned. Balsa shook her head.

"Did you get the fire built up?" Jiguro asked.

"Yeah, I did."

Jiguro's eyes suddenly locked on a vase stuffed full of flower petals and leaves. Takan and Yora burned them to sweeten the scent of the indoor fires. Balsa had noticed it before, but now Jiguro appeared alarmed.

"Get everyone out," he ordered. "Don't breathe the smoke from that fire, whatever you do."

Balsa returned to the other room and told the Sadan Taram that they had to leave. The fire was crackling merrily; there was strange green light moving below it, which escaped the grate and vented into the air along with a peculiar smell. Balsa was curious, but Jiguro had told her not to breathe in, so she didn't.

After everyone was out in the hallway and the door was closed so that the smoke wouldn't spread, Jiguro sought out Sari and Gamal and explained the situation.

"I see," Sari said. "They were planning to put us all to sleep. Then they'd have all night to break in and deal with us, and no one would know."

"Are we sure that's what the smoke was? Sleeping gas?" Balsa shook her head. "I saw this weird green light. I've smelled sleeping gas in the swamp, too, and it didn't smell the same."

Jiguro nodded sharply. "Fire insects."

"Fire insects?"

"They're a byproduct of toka, a mineral that's mined further south. Crushing it up makes that glowing stuff, and that's what it's called. They might have put it in the potpourri pots, but I actually think they laced

the firewood with it. They wouldn't have to come inside that way. It's a decent trap."

Overhearing this, Takan stepped forward. "Who would have done such a thing? And why?"

"How many merchants did you say came here asking after the Sadan Taram?" Jiguro asked.

"Six," Takan said.

"Including their guards?"

"There were four guards and two merchants," he said.

"And did you tell them that the Sadan Taram were coming today?"

"No," Takan said. "They weather's been unpredictable, so we couldn't be sure of that ourselves."

"But we did say we expected you tonight or tomorrow morning," Yora said. "The merchants said it was a shame that you wouldn't be here this morning."

"What were there names?" Jiguro asked.

Takan frowned. "You know, the man who did most of the talking didn't give a name. But the other one--tall skinny guy--said his name was Maran."

Jiguro gestured to Balsa. She followed him into the room where the wood laced with fire insects was burning. She held her breath so that she wouldn't inhale the smoke, then took an unlit candle from a table in the corner of the room. She lit the candle and passed it over the window frame, looking for signs of tampering.

There were scuff marks. The windows here weren't large, but they were large enough to allow a person through. It seemed like someone had tried to come in this way. They weren't here anymore, but there was no guarantee that they wouldn't come back.

Balsa and Jiguro exchanged knowing glances, then left the room.

***

Balsa woke up when she heard a noise. It was still night, but past moonset; the world was dark. Her eyes tracked to the window. She saw three shadows moving from the shed toward the inn.

Unsheathing her spear, Balsa prepared to fight. The glint of the spearhead under starlight would give her away, so she wrapped the spearhead in cloth. She crouched down facing the window and waited.

The three men crept closer, two carrying ladders. The windows of the first floor were too small to squeeze through, but that wasn't true on the second floor. Two men climbed up the ladders, and one jumped to the roof. When they were all in position, one of the men let out a sound like a bird call.

That's the signal, Balsa thought, holding herself still as three more men ran up to the ladders. They were going to come in any second now. Where was Jiguro?

Then Balsa heard it--footsteps, and farther away, the sound of the inn's front door unlocking and opening.

That was when Jiguro struck.

Balsa saw one of the men standing near the ladders fall with Jiguro's spear embedded in his back. Jiguro toppled the ladder in front of him, dislodging another man, then climbed up the remaining ladder and followed the intruder into the house. Three other men looped around to the front door of the inn, but they didn't make it far. Balsa couldn't see them anymore, but she could hear the commotion in the entryway clearly enough to understand what was happening.

Jiguro didn't need her help yet. Balsa stayed crouched down with her spear ready. She moved toward the entryway quietly and surveyed the battle.

One man was already down; his arm was broken and he was groaning on the floor. Jiguro had another attacker pinned against the wall. Another--maybe the man who'd climbed to the roof originally--was out cold in the doorway.

Swiftly, Jiguro rammed the attacker in the gut with the butt of his spear. The only other attacker in the entryway beat a hasty retreat, jumping over his fallen comrade and running for the woods.

"Don't let him get away!" Jiguro shouted.

Balsa sprang into motion, running after the fleeing man. An arrow whizzed past her ear. She went flat to the ground immediately as more arrows whistled over her head.

That was close.

Then she heard footsteps, and the sound of a spear deflecting more arrows. "Are you all right?" Jiguro called out to her.

Balsa got up and prepared to give chase again, but Jiguro caught her arm.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Two got away," Jiguro said. "And I caught two. Takan said there were six, but I think they got reinforcements. There are more archers in the woods, probably mounted. Even if we rode our pack horses, we wouldn't be able to catch up. There's no point in chasing them down now." He let go of Balsa's shoulder. He was shaking slightly and sweating; this fight hadn't been easy for him. They were outnumbered by their enemies, and possibly trapped in this inn. Balsa still wanted to know why.

"Sari was their target," Jiguro said as he caught his breath. "I learned that much."

"How?"

"I waited when they came in, same as you did. One of them was checking the faces of the sleeping Sadan Taram through the windows. They wanted to make sure they killed the right one."

Jiguro's eyes flashed in the darkness. He and Balsa looked at one another, listening to horses galloping away from the inn.

"Why are they after her?" Balsa asked. "Because she's their leader?"

"Probably," Jiguro said. "They covered their faces to protect themselves from the fire insect fumes. And two of them carried oil jugs. I think they wanted to burn the inn to hide the evidence--but only after making sure Sari was dead."

Balsa hugged herself. Goosebumps rose along her arms.

Jiguro and Balsa went back to where the Sadan Taram had been sleeping before the attack and found Takan and Yora also awake.

"The last one got away," Jiguro said. "They might bring more, but it's likely that we'll be safe for tonight at least. You all should get some sleep." His sense of calm instilled confidence. The innkeepers and Sadan Taram went back to bed.

Jiguro and Balsa rounded up their prisoners. Jiguro had caught one man on the second floor with a jug of oil. The other man was crawling away in the yard. Balsa knocked him out and lugged him back to the inn, complaining internally about how heavy he was.

Jiguro hadn't lugged his captive to the entryway yet. Balsa set hers down inside the door. Yora caught sight of what Balsa was doing and paused on the stairs, appearing both worried and puzzled.

A few of the Sadan Taram men were still awake, determined to help keep watch after the night's attack. While they had no skill or training with weapons, their life on the road meant they were accustomed to fighting off wolves or bandits with whatever came to hand, and they were canny enough as watchmen.

"Keep an eye on this guy for me," Balsa said.

The Sadan Taram men nodded.

Balsa went upstairs to see what was taking Jiguro so long. She found him in the hallway, carrying his captive to the stairs. When they reached the first floor, he took the man to an empty room and tossed him haphazardly on a bed. The man groaned in pain, and only then did Balsa realize that both of his arms were broken.

"What do you want with me?" the man asked.

"We can't question him here," Jiguro said. "There are Sadan Taram sleeping on this floor."

"I'll get everyone to the second floor, then," Balsa said. She went to the room where Sari and a few others were sleeping and explained the situation. "Jiguro wants to question the captives, but it might not be safe with you nearby. You don't want to hear it, and they might try to harm you again unless we're very careful. Out of an abundance of caution, I think it's best for you all to sleep upstairs for the rest of the night."

Sari nodded, but something in her expression conveyed that she understood Balsa and Jiguro's intentions with the captives. "What... will you do to them?"

Balsa didn't answer. Jiguro appeared in the doorway.

"Surely you wouldn't... Balsa, you wouldn't..."

"It's time to go to the second floor," Jiguro said inflexibly. Sari didn't try to argue, and the others followed her lead. After the door of the room on the second floor clicked shut, Balsa and Jiguro brought in the other two captives from the entryway, so that all three were in the same room.

Balsa knelt down next to the man she'd dragged in from the yard. It was part of her training to break the arms of swordsmen, in particular. A spearman could typically use either arm to fight with their weapon, but a swordsman was more or less dependent on his dominant arm. This man was a swordsman that they wanted to question, and he was still a threat. She should break his arm, but he was still unconscious, and she didn't want to. It didn't feel sporting.

She could break his arm to take him out of commission for a few weeks, or she could cripple him permanently. The knowledge of all the ways to break an arm went through her mind as she considered what she was going to do. She knew there was no way to avoid this, but the

thought of reaching out and breaking the unconscious man's arm made her feel cold through.

Jiguro's eyes were on her. She lifted the man's wrist over her knee, used her fingers to check the placement of the bone, and snapped his radius bone clean in two. A clean break. If he took care of it, it would mend fine.

A chill went through Balsa. She took a deep breath and waited for it to pass. The unconscious man was instantly awake, clutching his injured arm to his chest protectively.

Jiguro backhanded the man across the face, then drew his dagger from his belt. He brought the tip of the dagger to the man's right eye and paused an inch shy of stabbing in. The man went deadly pale. He was shaking from head to toe.

"You know why my blade is at your eye right now, don't you?" Jiguro asked.

The man nodded shallowly, never blinking.

"Why did you try to kill the Sadan Taram leader?" Jiguro demanded. "I won't ask twice. You have ten seconds to answer."

The man said nothing.

"Ten," Jiguro said, beginning the countdown. "Nine. Eight..."

Balsa watched the man's eyes as the reality of his situation sunk in. No one was coming to save him. He could only save himself by talking. When Jiguro counted "three," he opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out.

Jiguro hauled the man up by the collar, the blade moving even closer to the man's eye. "Speak," he said, "or it's the end for you."

The man nodded shallowly again. "All I've done, I've done as an honorable soldier of Rota, and that's a fact."

"Go on."

Defiance returned to the man's posture; he tried to struggle. "If you're going to cut my eye out, do it."

Jiguro slugged the man in the gut with the hilt of the dagger. The man's eyes rolled back in his head; he was unconscious again. Jiguro stood up straight, then faced Balsa. "We still need to question the other one," he said.

Balsa shook her head. "I'm not sure we'll get much out of him. They already know that a few got away. All they need to do is wait for help. They're soldiers; they probably considered themselves dead from the moment they were captured."

"We've already gotten more out of them than they intended to let slip," Jiguro said.

"What?"

"This man fights for honor, not money. Not even for an employer, necessarily. These aren't mercenaries. They think that they have a good reason for what they're doing."

Someone knocked on the door. Balsa opened it and found Sari standing there, looking worried.

"Is it over?" Sari asked.

Jiguro nodded. "For now. How is everyone?"

"Sleeping," she said. "Though not everyone. It's hard to get to sleep, after something like that."

Jiguro nodded again. "I see. And was there something you wanted to talk about?" He crossed the room to the pile of firewood, inspected it, then picked up a log and set it up straight on the floor. He took his sharp knife and peeled off a chunk of the log from the side, a little more than a foot long and an inch thick. The blade would dull from using it like that, but Balsa understood with the stick was for.

"Yank the bone straight to set it, then splint it with this," Jiguro said, passing the stick to Balsa.

Balsa nodded.

Sari looked at Balsa, her face pale, but she didn't say anything. Balsa felt Sari's eyes on her, but she didn't say anything, either. She needed to concentrate.

As Jiguro cut more splints and Balsa set bones, Jiguro sent Sari around the room with a candle so that she could take a closer look at the captives. "Do you recognize any of these men?" Jiguro asked.

"I've never seen them before," Sari said.

"That man there knew your face," Jiguro said.

"What?" Sari asked, surprised.

"He was looking from bed to bed through the window. When he saw yours, he drew his sword and gave the signal to attack."

"How…" Sari shook her head. "No, I know how. We travel from place to place, and we stand out as traveling musicians. I see more people in a day than I could possibly remember. This man could easily have blended into the crowd, and I never would have noticed him."

Jiguro nodded. "It's understandable that you wouldn't recognize him. We know that he's a Rotan soldier, and that he and the others are

after you, specifically. Not the rest of the Sadan Taram. Do you have any idea why?"

Sari shook her head again. "I can't think of a single reason. I'm sorry."

Jiguro took Sari's arm and steered her into the dining area. They sat down, and Jiguro told her everything that he and Balsa had learned from the captive soldier about the attack.

"We know he's a soldier and is acting on his oath as one, but we don't know who he serves, " Jiguro said. "We can assume that he's either working for the king, or a powerful clan. It must have something to do with your rounds, since the attacks are all based on your visitation schedule."

Sari went pale. "I don't have anything to do with the King of Rota…" Her eyes went wide. "But a maharan trade deal to Rakul Province *would* involve the king. I can't see any other connection between us and anyone powerful in Rota."

"That's what I think, too," Jiguro said. "A lot of maharan wood is changing hands this year, and it's affecting the economy in Rakul Province. I just can't figure out what you and the Sadan Taram have to do with that."

"I don't know, either," Sari said. "The Sadan Taram are musicians, not traders. Maybe we're interfering with the merchants' work in some way? But we don't mean to, and I haven't been approached about that."

Jiguro rubbed his chin. "We know for sure now that the Sadan Taram aren't what they're after. It's just you. We need a reason why you would be targeted, and no one else."

Sari held her breath.

"As to that…" Jiguro nodded. "I think I've got it. You're the only one who can open a safe path through the Valley of the Forest King. Maybe your attackers fear that power--or they want to prevent you from doing that this year."

"Maharan wood doesn't grow in the Valley of the Forest King," Sari said.

Jiguro shrugged. "It's my best guess based on the information we have. I might be able to learn a little more from the soldiers, but I doubt it. But I've been thinking about how odd it is to leave the corpse of that hero alone for half a year. That's not normal, but it speaks to how much the Aru clan lord fears venturing into that valley. If you're the only ones with the power to travel there, and you can make it safe for others, that makes you unique and valuable."

Jiguro set both his hands on the table. "Sari, if you and your people go to the Valley of the Forest King this year, you will die. More soldiers will come for you, trained just like these ones were, and this will be their last chance to catch you. If you don't turn aside now, they'll kill you."

Sari didn't say anything for a long while. She looked down. Tentatively, she said, "I know you're right, but this is my duty. I can't just give it up, no matter how terrible the risk."

"Can you still complete your ceremony if you're shot?" Jiguro asked severely.

Sari blinked.

"It's a serious question," Jiguro said. "We can protect you, but we'll certainly be outnumbered. Even if we make it in, we might not make it out alive. You have to understand that now."

"I understand," Sari said.

"All right," Jiguro said. "The first thing we should do is send a message to the Aru clan lord. He has an interest in protecting innocent people and punishing murderers who are on his lands."

"What do you think he'll do?"

"If we're lucky, he'll send reinforcements to the Valley of the Forest King. That would improve our chances. We probably don't need to worry much until we're past Kemiru Hill. This part of the province is more populated than most. The danger is on the road, after we pass the hill. There will be fewer witnesses and more places for enemies to hide."

Sari nodded. "Only people who are on business for the clan lord use that road. There won't be anyone else there to help us."

"Yes. So if we mobilize the clan lord's forces and have them accompany us to the Valley of the Forest King, we'll be more difficult to attack. If our enemies do attack us, they'll immediately be branded as criminals and chased off. It's our safest option at this point."

"I've never sent a litter to a Rotan clan lord before..." Sari wrung her hands. "But Lord Shisal should hear us out."

"Lord Shisal?" Jiguro's forehead creased. "Oh, right, the Aru clan lord that got married to a Rotan woman not too long ago."

"I'm certain he'll at least give us a fair hearing," Sari said.

Jiguro nodded. "All right. We'll send the letter first thing in the morning, and tell them to send a reply to Tokua. That's the village at the foot of Kemiru Hill. There should be plenty of time for the response to reach us."

Jiguro stood up from his chair and looked outside. "It's almost dawn," he muttered. "You should get some sleep. There's no harm in sleeping in a little today."

Sari rose to her feet, walked over to Jiguro and kissed him softly on the cheek. Then she went back to the second floor, where the other Sadan Taram were sleeping.

"Balsa," Jiguro said.

Balsa's eyes flicked open. She'd dozed during the conversation.

"Are you tired?" Jiguro asked.

She nodded. The long night and the attack had both depleted her reserves of energy. The catnap she'd just stolen wouldn't help her very much when they set out later in the day.

"I'll keep watch," Jiguro said. "You get some sleep, too."

"It's my turn to keep the night watch," Balsa said. "I'll finish my shift, then go to sleep."

Jiguro shook his head. "You'll be scouting later. You can't do that without real rest."

"Scouting? Are we going to try to figure out where the other soldiers went?" Balsa asked.

Jiguro smiled. "You did well today at predicting how they'd attack. If they left any signs for us to follow, I'm sure you'll find them."

There was still a splint in Balsa's hands. Jiguro took it, then said, "Go to bed."

Balsa nodded and got up. She did feel tired, but at least her mind was clear. She went upstairs, looking back once at Jiguro. He was still holding the splint.

chapter nine

a guard's role

When they reached Tokua Village, it was drizzling rain. They took lodgings at an inn to escape the weather.

Balsa's first task after that was to rotate the horses. There was a stable in town that was connected to other stables along this route; all of them rented horses to travelers. Balsa stabled and fed the horses that needed extra care and exchanged them for fresher ones, paying a little extra for the trouble. The stable was exceptionally crowded; she had trouble finding fresh stalls for the horses she brought in. As she was removing the soaked-through saddle blankets and soiled tack, she noticed a stable worker passing by and asked about all the horses.

"You're not from around here, are ya?" the man asked. "It's just about the time when we venerate Lagaro, the great hero. Clan lords and their families come for miles around. You can see the hero's grave from the top of the hill."

"So many people gather just for that?" Balsa knew that Lagaro was venerated here, of course, but she hadn't known there would be so many people flocking to this small village. Sari had told her that the Sadan Taram would climb the hill, along with the Aru clan lord or his

representative, so that they could pay their respects. Apparently, other people in the village would be making the climb as well.

"It's a good thing you came in today and not tomorrow," the stable worker said. "We wouldn't have had any spaces left."

Balsa left the stable. She adjusted the collar of her karru winter coat to cover her neck better, then headed back to the inn. It had stopped raining, but the sky was growing dark with clouds.

There were a lot of people in the street. Though it wasn't much past noon, Balsa smelled more than one drunk person in the crowd. Some men sang and danced as she passed them by, though they weren't very good at it. It took Balsa awhile to realize that most of them were singing the same song.

It was a song of praise to the Tahsa people. That seemed a bit strange to Balsa, given the long history of warfare between the Rotans and the Tahsa. The Tahsa people were greatly reduced in numbers compared to the Rotans these days. She was expecting to see more open resentment.

Maybe she didn't because it was hard to tell a Tahsa person from a Rotan person? They all wore the same kind of clothes, looked similar and spoke the same language. She didn't see any Rotans picking on a Tahsa person, or vice versa. She suspected that the Tahsa people had intermarried with Rotans or Kanbalese people from the other side of the northern border to survive.

The smell of recent rain mixed with that of frying oils and cooking meat. Exotic spices tickled her nose. Balsa's stomach turned over; she was starving. She hadn't eaten anything today except for a piece of bam on the road in the early morning. She was tempted to buy a piece of

fried meat before heading back to the inn, but she had little money, and the situation in the village troubled her.

There shouldn't be this many people here. Any soldiers that wanted to attack Sari could hide in plain sight, climbing behind the Sadan Taram as they paid their respects to Lagaro on Kemiru Hill. She wondered if Jiguro had a plan for dealing with this setback. She certainly hoped he did.

"Get your fried meat here!" an older woman called out brightly from a food stand. She was in Balsa's path, meaning that Balsa could walk and eat so that she wouldn't lose time.

She bought some meat from the woman. "A piece of bam and a piece of meat, please."

"Coming right up. Would you like extra salt with that, dear?"

"Yes, please."

"That's what I thought; people from Kanbal seem to like it better that way." The woman's hands moved quickly, placing a sizzling piece of meat on sliced bam, then wrapping it all up with a saka leaf.

Balsa ate on the move, keeping the food close to her face to minimize dripping of the oil and meat juices onto the street. By the time she reached the inn, she'd eaten the whole thing and hadn't spilled a bit of it. She used the saka leaf to wipe off her oily hands and tossed it in a rubbish bin inside the inn. Kii was sitting on the steps to the second floor, drinking tea from an earthenware teapot.

"Wow, you got back quick!" Kii said with a little wave. "Everyone was saying you wouldn't be able to get back here until nightfall, what with the crowds and all."

"My business at the stable went well," Balsa said. "They have good horses ready for us to take whenever we leave. Where's my dad?"

"Upstairs, first room on the right. It's just past lunchtime, but you can get tea at the front desk if you ask for it. I asked the kitchen to save you some lunch, too." She grinned. "But it looks like you ate already."

"Huh? You can tell?"

Kii nodded. "The spicy smell. It's all over you, and it couldn't have come from anything else."

Balsa shrugged. "I know it was a waste, but I couldn't help it. I haven't eaten a thing since sunrise."

Kii nodded. "That's why I asked them to save you some. If you're still hungry, you should go eat."

"Thanks." Balsa went to the kitchen and found a tray that had been set aside for her. She returned to Kii on the stairs, deciding to eat there and wait for Jiguro to come down.

"Have we heard anything from Lord Shisal?" Balsa asked. "He was supposed to send his answer here."

"We sent the letter with the fastest messenger we could, but we haven't heard back," Kii said. "Maybe the messenger's having trouble getting through. The road into Tokua sure was packed."

Balsa nodded. "We have to leave tomorrow at the latest... this clan lord messenger's cutting things pretty close." Assuming they received a reply at all.

"A few men have agreed to stay behind when we make our pilgrimage to the hill," Kii said. "It takes a while to climb it. If the

messenger arrives after we leave, we might still get help. Maybe." She didn't sound hopeful.

"Yeah, maybe. But I wouldn't count on it." Balsa was fairly certain that they wouldn't be getting a reply. That was irritating. Sari had seemed sure that Lord Shisal would at least try to help.

Kii finished her tea in one long gulp, then stuck her tongue out at Balsa and ran to the kitchen for more. Balsa cleaned mud off her boots using some rags in the corner. Jiguro hadn't come down yet, so she wanted to find him.

Her boots reasonably clean, Balsa climbed the stairs and knocked on the door of the first room on the right. Gamal opened it.

"Oh, Balsa! You're back early."

"Gamal." Balsa nodded. "Are you feeling better?" He'd inhaled a lot of fire insect-laced smoke and had spent much of the morning coughing.

"Yeah, lots better," Gamal said. "Thanks for asking. I don't remember much of what happened--the firewood glowed green, like you said, and then I got sleepy. I think I saw someone try to sneak in through the window, but I couldn't move. It was terrifying."

"How's your headache?" Balsa asked. Gamal and the other Sadan Taram unfortunate enough to breathe in too much of the poisonous smoke had all suffered headaches, too.

"Mostly cleared up," Gamal said.

Balsa came further into the room and leaned her spear against the wall. Sari and several other Sadan Taram were seated around a table in the center of the room. Jiguro was at the window, looking out.

"I see you got yourself some street food," Jiguro said.

"You saw that?" Balsa asked.

"Saw you inhaling it on your way through the door," Jiguro said with a slight smile. "Have any messengers come in?"

"Not yet. I just asked Kii the same thing."

"Do you have the map of our route to the hill?"

Balsa nodded, then pulled out a piece of rolled-up parchment from her carryall bag. She spread the map out on the table, and Jiguro surveyed it thoughtfully for a few seconds. "We need to assume we're not getting reinforcements at this point," he said. "There are two places along the road that are particularly dangerous. The first is the forest beyond the festival area. Any soldiers there will have plenty of cover, and they'll be able to conceal their identities even if they attack."

Balsa ran her finger along the line of the road. The forest Jiguro was talking about was part of the pilgrimage route. Neither Balsa nor Jiguro had climbed Kemiru Hill before, but they learned from the Sadan Taram that the road thinned there and that it was easy to get lost in the trees.

"I think archers are their best bet for picking off a single target," Balsa said. "Probably not right at the forest entrance, but a little further in."

Sari frowned deeply. "Why is that?"

"Because there will be a lot of people streaming into the woods at the start, and there's a risk of them being discovered. If they wait a while and choose their positions--either in the trees or behind them---they'll see us coming long before we see them. It seems to me like

they're not trying to kill us all. Using bows and greater visibility would make sense, given their behavior so far."

Sari swallowed heavily, then blinked.

"I don't think we should take the road," Balsa said. "There's a stream that enters the forest, here." Balsa tapped the map. "It's off-road, so it'll be slower going, but our attackers might not expect it. Even if they do, it'll change their plans, and maybe slow them down. We can move in shadows and send scouts ahead to make sure we're not spotted."

Balsa caught Jiguro's eye. He nodded thoughtfully. "It's not a bad plan, but we have to consider the idea that the whole forest is seeded with enemy soldiers. We know that they don't want Sari to get away this time."

"Have you managed to take a look at the forest? Were there any signs of enemies?" Balsa asked.

"I found three sets of tracks here, here, and here," Jiguro said, pointing to the map. "But the tracks are a week old or more. I didn't find any newer tracks."

Suddenly, Kii burst into the room, carrying a pot of tea. "We can't leave," she said. She was slightly out of breath. "No one's allowed to climb the hill this year."

"What do you mean, Kii?" Sansa asked.

"People are talking about the earthquake and the curse," Kii said. "They're scared of it."

The Sadan Taram exchanged panicked glances.

"Takan and Yora did tell us the earthquake rattled people..." Sari looked thoughtful. "To think they'd prevent people from climbing the

hill, though--it's unheard-of."

"I heard some rumors around town," Gamal said. "Since the earthquake, it seems like people's luck has gotten worse. People falling from horses, sickness in the village. That kind of thing. People are so scared that they plan not to climb the hill this year."

Sari shook her head. "They can't prevent us from doing so. It's not in their power. I believe that whoever's responsible for putting pressure on the people here is trying to isolate us, making it easier to attack us as we travel. In light of that, the most likely location for an attack is the Boundary Tree."

"What's the Boundary Tree?" Balsa asked.

"It's near the top of the hill," Sari said. "The tree sticks out; it's very tall and wrapped all around with red prayer rope. We need to stop there to perform a few rites before we move on. Even men who don't know the forest well will be able to locate us there. In years past, the villagers would follow us there and sing."

There were several empty teacups on the table. Kii made her way around the room, refilling them. "When the people in the kitchen realized I was a Sadan Taram, they called me over and asked me if we could perform a few funeral rites while we're here. They also said we couldn't climb the hill this year. It's not a joke, and they do plan to stop us--and anyone else. I heard there are already archers on the road."

Jiguro's eyes narrowed. Then his gaze shifted to Balsa. "Explain the route we take to the top of the hill again," he said. "Going in secret was our best plan before, but it's our only plan now."

Balsa nodded. "It'll be hard to sneak around the road, but it should be possible. Climbing up the hill using the river as a guide shouldn't be too difficult. The hill is tall, not steep. The only reason it's so hard to get to the Valley of the Forest King from here is that there's a cliff in the way. Sari, do you have to perform the ritual right on top of the hill, or would somewhere else work?"

Sari shook her head. "We always perform the ritual in the same place."

"Why don't we all surround her the whole way up, so that they can't get a clear shot?" Kii suggested. "There's an armor shop in town. All of us could buy shields and..."

"Kii," Jiguro cut in quietly. "Leave this to your guards. We know what we're doing."

Kii fell silent.

"Continue, Balsa," Jiguro said.

"All right," Balsa said. "As a strategy, surrounding Sari with shields isn't the worst idea, but that can't be the end of our plan. We can keep out of sight until the Boundary Tree, trying to avoid any enemies in the trees--but that's where things get tricky.

"Close to the summit, the trees give way to grassland. If we crouch down and move quietly, we should be able to maintain a stealthy approach." Balsa traced her proposed route on the map with her index finger. "If there are archers in the grass, we're in trouble. But less trouble than we'd be in if we stuck to the trees. If I were going to attack from the plains, I'd choose here, here, or here to do it, so I say we scout those areas and make sure they're safe first. There are a few areas that

are too steep and muddy for travel, so I don't think any archers will be approaching from these directions."

"I found tracks in the areas you indicated," Jiguro said. "Not fresh, but fresher than in other places. I think we can assume there are archers in the grass."

"Buying shields as a defense for archers makes sense," Balsa continued, "but the Sadan Taram aren't used to carrying them, and they're heavy. I recommend buying some--maybe half a dozen--and surrounding Sari with shield-bearers that take shifts. It's a long climb uphill. The disadvantage of that is that everyone needs to prepare themselves for danger."

Jiguro shook his head. "Sari and I are the only ones who will climb to the summit. Balsa, I want you running interference as an archer."

Balsa blinked in surprise. That would put Jiguro in just as much danger as Sari. She didn't like that plan at all. "Dad, the archers will have a clear shot at you. If you can't block them all..."

"You'll be in the same boat," Jiguro said.

Balsa wanted to say more, but there was a forbidding light in Jiguro's eyes.

"What does that mean--'running interference?'" Sari asked.

"Balsa will discover the other archers and kill them to help keep us safe," Jiguro explained. "It's our job to protect you. Don't worry about what we have to do." He turned to Balsa. "Bows are fairly cheap in the village. Take what you need from the money pouch and buy one for yourself."

"But you won't be back for dinner, then," Kii said with a pout.

"Have the kitchen put another tray aside for me," Balsa said.

Jiguro prepared to leave. He told Balsa to get her coat, so she did. It was still drying from the misty rain. She shrugged the coat on, retrieved her spear, and followed Jiguro outside.

"Dad," Balsa said when they were out of earshot of the Sadan Taram. "Why are you pushing such a risky plan? I don't like it."

"It's impossible to prevent people from making the pilgrimage," Jiguro said quietly. "There are already a lot of people on the hill, prepared to make the climb. We'll have them for cover until we reach the Boundary Tree. We don't have to worry about danger until then."

"Climbing up that hill alone with the attackers' target is suicide," Balsa said. "I know as well as you that the other Sadan Taram aren't in any danger. You're taking all the risk on yourself. It's too dangerous."

"Lower your voice." Jiguro glanced behind him. There were a few Sadan Taram milling around the inn that might have been able to hear her at this distance. "We're guards. We don't show them our fear."

Balsa's lips trembled.

Jiguro pulled his hood up over his face, then started walking briskly toward the center of the village.

"Dad," Balsa said. She kept her voice down this time. "I... don't know if I can do it. What if I can't protect you?"

Jiguro didn't say anything.

"I'll be one archer against at least three more. Once I take one down, they'll know where I am. And if I shoot and miss, I'll be in even more trouble."

"Don't miss," Jiguro said. "You have to take out the other archers, otherwise we have no chance at all. We have a vague understanding of where they should be, but we don't have time to scout the hill fully before departure."

"We should at least have Sadan Taram surround you with shields," Balsa said. "That makes more sense to me."

"No," Jiguro said. "That puts too many of them in danger. All we need to do is get Sari to the summit to perform her ritual. After that, there'd be no point in killing her here."

"We don't know how many archers there are," Balsa said. "And they want to prevent her from getting to the Valley of the Forest King, right? Why not kill her during the ritual, or after it?"

Jiguro shook his head. "The three men who got away are the only ones close enough to attack. Getting a large number of reinforcements through this crowd would be challenging, if they've even managed to tell their leadership what happened. There won't be more than three archers; I'm fairly sure of that."

"That's a lot to risk on a ‘fairly sure,'" Balsa muttered.

Jiguro stopped walking and turned to face her. "One of the archers... he's probably a merchant. One of the men who got away was dressed as one."

"What?"

"Takan said his name was Maran, I think," Jiguro said. "Tall man, skinny."

Balsa nodded. "Right. He was one of the ones who stood behind the merchant who did most of the talking. He didn't say much."

"He had the build of an archer," Jiguro said. "I would bet he's one. When I grabbed his arm, he popped his elbow out of its socket and slipped free. He's double-jointed at the very least."

Balsa considered. Archery was hard on the arms; drawing the bow back from the string put extra pressure on the joints. A lot of the career archers she'd met were double-jointed.

"He wore a ring on his draw finger, too," Jiguro said. "Probably to improve his grip so the arrow wouldn't slip."

Balsa didn't remember a ring, but she hadn't seen all the attackers up close like Jiguro had. The more he said, the more she was convinced that Maran was an archer.

"The only reinforcements they could possibly call on would be the soldiers in the caravan we left," Jiguro said. "There were no other archers there. I'd expect the attack to come from behind, after they've circled us, but the archers are the only danger you need to worry about."

It started drizzling again.

"Do you know how much fire insects cost?" Jiguro asked.

"No."

"Three gold coins for a handful. That's how much. It's prohibitively expensive. The amount they used to poison the Sadan Taram cost a small fortune. They weren't planning on being caught or leaving any evidence behind. It's important for them to do this all in secret. Trust me when I say that this plan is the safest one for everyone."

The armor and weapons shop came into view.

"A guard protects," Jiguro said. "They defend their charges with everything they have. That's a guard's role. Never disparage yourself or your own abilities in front of an employer. It doesn't matter if you believe in yourself or not. All that matters is that you fulfill your role, and defend the lives entrusted to you."

Balsa bit her bottom lip. She wanted to say that Jiguro's life was worth more than their employer's--that what he was saying made her feel sick. But she said nothing. She went into the store to buy a bow.

chapter ten

the price of a life

The evening stillness sent a chill through Balsa's bones. She crept down, shielded on three sides by trees, and took aim at the underbrush, practicing her archery. She shot at the bushes, then prepared another shot immediately, turned a few inches, and fired.

She imagined three arrows pelting toward her in the gloom. If there were three archers and she missed her first shot, she'd have to avoid their fire. She flattened her back against the tree and made herself small.

She imagined a fourth arrow embedding itself in the tree just above her head.

Four archers. Damn. She knew Jiguro could fend off three arrows at once with his spear, but what if they did have four? What if the soldiers and Maron had gone to get reinforcements after all? They must have noticed how good Jiguro was with the spear. Balsa moved away from the tree where she'd shot her first arrow, moving in silence.

One, she counted, and fired.

Balsa bit her lip and aimed at another tree.

Two.

To the left of the tree, Balsa noticed another push perfect for taking cover under. She shot at it next, barely two seconds after her second shot.

Three.

Balsa worried that she wouldn't be able to shoot one down before the others converged on her. If she missed, Jiguro would have at least three archers to contend with.

Balsa heard footsteps behind her coming from a patch of tall grass. "Balsa," Kii whispered.

Balsa didn't turn. She gritted her teeth and tracked her imaginary targets with her eyes: one, two, three. She drew her bow and nocked another arrow, but didn't let it fly yet. She was breathing deeply, almost panting, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Balsa!" Kii grabbed her shoulder.

Balsa jerked backwards and dropped her bow. Her thumb got caught as it fell and was cut on the string. Her blood dripped onto the ground. Balsa brought her bleeding thumb to her mouth and sucked the blood away, still ignoring Kii. The pain of the cut dulled as it bled. Balsa frowned at the taste of iron in her mouth.

"Uh..." Kii was still standing behind Balsa. "I've never seen you make a face like that before. Mr. Jiguro promised he'd keep the Conductor safe no matter what, but you're still worried. What's wrong?"

Balsa turned to face Kii. "Jiguro didn't lie," she said. "I'm sure he'll protect your Conductor. That's not what I'm worried about."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know if I can do it," Balsa said. "I'm not confident that I can deal with the archers and protect Jiguro. Not on my own." She felt tears stinging the backs of her eyes and bit them back. "If there are four archers--or if Jiguro's just unlucky, or I miss--he'll have to deflect an arrow with his body. He can only move the spear so fast, and I..."

She faced away from Kii, looking at a tree. Her vision swam with tears.

Balsa was a veteran of many battles. She shouldn't doubt herself; she knew that. When the fire of battle was on her, she was more than equal to any other guard she'd ever met, aside from Jiguro. She understood that what sustained her during long fights was her rage, and that this time, she couldn't tap into it. She wasn't angry at the Sadan Taram's enemies for trying to kill Sari. She was terrified that Jiguro might die--and because of that, her hard-earned confidence had deserted her.

I'm not worried about protecting my own life this time.

This time, she would be defending Jiguro. She'd never had to do that before. She wasn't even sure that she knew how. The image of Jiguro falling, pierced by three arrows, wouldn't leave her mind.

"Uh," Kii said tentatively. "I'm sorry I startled you. I didn't mean it." Kii was crying openly.

Balsa frowned at her. "It's fine. You don't need to apologize."

"I do," Kii said. "You have no reason to believe me, but we really will pay you both, I promise! I never wanted you to have to risk your lives for us. And I know you're mad at our Conductor, but she's not doing all this--visiting the graves and putting spirits to rest--because she wants

to. She doesn't have a choice." Tears trickled down her cheeks. "People pay us to do funerals and stuff, but all that money goes back to the village to help the others, so I don't have anything to give you, and, and..."

Balsa blinked. She wasn't mad at Sari. And she certainly wasn't mad at Kii. Even if she died because of Sari, Balsa wouldn't hate her. Risking her own life was part of the job.

"Kii, listen," Balsa said. "You have nothing to apologize for. Really. Jiguro and I were prepared to lay down our lives for you all when you hired us. You needed our help, remember? You were worried about being attacked again."

Kii nodded. "But still... I'm sorry." She sniffed. "Why do you do this work, Balsa? It's so dangerous!"

Balsa looked away.

"Couldn't you do something else?" Kii asked. "There are a lot of different ways to make money."

Balsa looked up at Kii again. "If it was just a matter of money, you'd be right. But I do this work for my own survival. If I stopped now and did something else, my life would have no meaning." She shook her head. "I know I kill people for a living, but if I didn't, they would kill me. It's an honest enough profession, and without it, I'd be dead by now."

Balsa picked up her bow. Her thumb was scabbing over. "I know you and Sari feel sorry for me or something, but you shouldn't. Every time I see one of you look at me with pity—'Oh, poor Balsa, she's only sixteen'—I want to scream." She set her jaw. "You don't know anything about me. Don't judge me by your own standards."

Balsa heard more footsteps coming from the grassy area behind her. It was Sari, moving carefully so that she wouldn't step on sticks or get a face full of tall grass. Sari sped to Kii's side and knelt down. "Kii, are you all right? Have you been crying?"

"It's nothing." Kii wiped her face.

Sari looked at Kii with an expression of concern, but when she realized that Kii wasn't about to explain her mood, she shifted her attention to Balsa. "I was looking for Jiguro," she said. "He's not in the camp. I thought he might be practicing the bow with you, but it seems like he's not here, either. Do you know where he is?"

"No idea," Balsa said. "I haven't seen him since I left the weapons shop."

Kii frowned. "Conductor, didn't Jiguro tell you not to leave the inn? It's not safe."

Sari shrugged. "Yes, but-- well, I was actually looking for both of you. I wanted to talk to Balsa and Jiguro together, but it seems like no one knows where he is."

Sari approached Balsa and took her free hand, the one that wasn't holding the bow. "What do you say to ending your guard contract now?" she asked.

Balsa's eyes widened with surprise.

"Before, we thought that our attackers were after all of us, but now we know that they're only after me. I don't want you and Jiguro risking your lives just to save me."

Balsa opened her mouth to say something, but Sari put up a hand, requesting silence. "I couldn't bear to have someone else die because of

my decision. I have to perform the rites in the Valley of the Forest King, whatever the danger to myself, but I'm not required to endanger other people. I won't do it. Please try to understand."

Sari was staring straight at Balsa. Balsa extricated her hand from Sari's with a little frown.

"If you're trying to get us to back off," Balsa said, "you'll have to put in more effort than that." She got up and started retrieving the arrows she'd shot during practice. "You have to understand that dad would never accept that. We have to follow you all the way to your destination in order to get paid, anyway. We're not just going to tag along and *not* protect you. How stupid do you think we are?"

Sari glanced at Balsa, seeming uncomfortable. Yellow sunlight broke through the leaves in a speckled pattern, covering Sari's face and clothes. There was fear in her eyes. She brought her hands together and held them like she was praying.

I guess she loves Jiguro after all, Balsa thought. The thought hurt her. She didn't want to look at Sari when she was acting this way. She wasn't sure why.

Balsa gathered the rest of her arrows in her quiver and resumed archery practice. An arrow thudded into one of her pre-selected targets at the base of a tree. Balsa felt the shaft scrape across her thumb, irritating, but she ignored it.

In the distance, the sun glinted off a cliff face of white stone. Balsa tracked it with her eyes, noting rocky outcroppings that were close to the path the Sadan Taram would take up the hill. She used the tip of an arrow to trace a proposed path for herself.

Balsa smiled. She had an idea.

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"Balsa." Sari sounded hesitant.

Balsa picked up her scattered arrows in haste and placed them back in her quiver. "Let's go back to the inn," she said.

Sari followed Balsa, wandering like a ghost. Several times, she opened her mouth to say something, but then she seemed to think better of it. They didn't say a single word to one another on the way back.

But Sari hadn't given up on talking to Balsa and Jiguro together. By the time Jiguro returned, it was late evening, and most of the other Sadan Taram were already asleep.

"We won't be going to Kemiru Hill or the Valley of the Forest King this year," Sari said. "I've thought about it, and I made up my mind. I think it's better for us to turn toward home now." She looked at her feet. "It's my duty to put the spirits of the battlefield to rest, but no one rewards me or the other Sadan Taram for this work. No one punishes us, either."

Jiguro thought for a moment. "Why bother doing it, then, if there are no consequences?"

Sari smiled sadly. "Well, our people believe that the spirits of the dead—those we soothe and those of our people—become yasu radolo, guardian spirits. Aside from that, I've never heard a reason." She brushed a strand of hair off her forehead. "I suppose I'll have to write a letter of apology to the Aru clan lord. He might be angry; we've never missed a year before, and with the grave open and the hero's body

exposed because the earthquake, he might be even more upset. The wind that blows the spirits to their rest is turbulent, but we cannot reach the source of it. It's not safe for us to travel up Kemiru Hill, or to the Valley of the Forest King. He never responded to our request for aid. If I explain the circumstances, he'll understand."

Balsa frowned. Sari noticed her expression and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"What is this ‘wind that blows the spirits to their rest?' You've never mentioned it before."

Sari bit her lip. "As to that-- it's difficult to explain. The wind isn't ordinary wind."

"So it's Nayugu's wind?" Balsa asked bluntly.

Sari nodded. "We call it Noyook, but it is called Naguyu in New Yogo. Do you know much about it?"

"My childhood friend is a magic weaver in New Yogo," Balsa said. "He can see Nayugu."

Sari smiled. "I see. Perhaps I can explain after all. I can feel Noyook's wind. That's why I was chosen as the leader of the Sadan Taram." She rubbed at her chest absently; Balsa remembered where she stored the water harp. "We lend the power of Noyook's wind, using it to guide us to the spirits that need our help. We don't decide where the wind goes; we simply follow it."

Balsa blinked. She wasn't sure how that was supposed to work. It was probably a magic weaver thing. She never understood that stuff.

Sari smiled at Balsa's puzzled expression. "Even knowing about Noyook, it's not always easy to understand. The wind can choose, and it

chooses for us. Try to think of the wind like water flowing in a river. The water flows in a certain direction, and you can see it if you look at the current. It is these currents that we follow from place to place. Since time immemorial, the leader of the Sadan Taram has used their senses to find a road from spirit to spirit. Our visitation schedule each year is determined by Noyook's wind.

"The timing is particular," Sari said. "That's one problem I haven't been able to find a way around. When the wind blows and we follow it, we only have a limited time to reach the next spirit or battleground. Kemiru Hill is always difficult to visit. We have less than a day to perform the ritual on the hill now. If we don't, the wind will move on, guiding us to the Valley of the Forest King. I can already feel the wind trying to change directions."

Jiguro had been silent up until now. He tilted his chin, then said, "I'm only a guard, but I'd like to make an observation."

"What is it?" Sari asked.

"I think that if you turn around now and go home, you'll still be killed."

Sari blinked. "Why?"

"Your enemies are stalking *you*, not spirits. Call it a guard's intuition. If I had to guess, I'd say that they were afraid of something. Maybe of whatever happens in the Valley of the Forest King during your ritual. From my perspective—if I wanted to kill you, I could do it anywhere. But these men who are after you are following your route. Not because of your people or traditions, but because of you. I think they're scared to kill you because of blame. They've gone to a lot of trouble to keep their activities secret. If they ambush you in isolated

places, like they have been, there's less risk of them being caught." He shook his head. "They have a secret, or you do. Maybe both. A secret worth killing over."

Balsa gulped. *What kind of secret?* she thought.

"But we don't know the reason you're being hunted," Jiguro said. "We only know that you are. And the Aru clan lord should have given us a reply by now. We sent an express messenger, and he's had plenty of time to send a response. I worry that there's a reason for that, too."

Jiguro rubbed his chin. "You've been traveling to the Valley of the Forest King to ease Lagaro's spirit for years, and you've never been attacked before. That means the situation has changed, somewhere. Your enemies might have been sent out with new orders this year."

"Is this because of the maharan wood?" Balsa asked. She still wondered why Kaina had droned on and on about it.

Jiguro nodded. "That's one possibility. But it's not the only thing that changed this year."

"The earthquake," Sari said.

Jiguro nodded again. "Lagaro's grave is broken; his body lies exposed. The Aru clan lord has every reason to want to lay his esteemed ancestor to rest, but he's made no move to do so. That makes me think that the Aru clan is behind this, if not the lord himself."

Sari gasped. It was clear that she didn't want to believe what Jiguro was saying.

"And didn't the lord marry into a Rotan clan not too long ago?" Balsa asked. "You said it yourself before, Sari. Politics are complicated."

Sari nodded. "You're right; I did say that. But I have to think that you're wrong. I cannot think that Lord Shisal would wish me harm. However, his wife—Lady Oria of the Magua clan—well, she is not our enemy, but her family is. The Magua clan often speaks ill of the Sadan Taram. They spread rumors that we are the cause of sicknesses and deaths. I never thought she intended to harm us, but the timing of the earthquake coincided with her marriage, and there were just as many nasty rumors about her floating around before the Magua clan decided to blame us for everything. She probably just wants the rumors to die down. The Magua clan has an interest in suppressing the traditions of the Tahsa people as well, though I can't be certain of her stance on that."

Jiguro nodded gravely. The wind blew through the window of the room. "You and I are going to have a long talk about all this later. We asked about your enemies before, and none of the Sadan Taram mentioned Lady Oria. Including you." He sighed. "I questioned our messenger, and he swore that he delivered the letter we sent directly into to Lady Oria's hands. I don't know her character, so I can't make snap judgments, but it all looks suspicious, at any rate."

Jiguro thought for a moment, then said, "Here's what we're going to do. There are only a few days left before the end of your journey and our promised payment. Balsa and I will continue to guard you until then. We'll double back a little first, to make them think you've given up on making your visitation to Kemiru Hill this year. That might buy us some time. But we can't give up for real. I can think of at least two reasons why your journey must continue."

"What are they?" Sari asked.

"Balsa, do you know?"

Balsa nodded. "One reason, anyhow. If you quit now, we'll never know why these people are coming after you in the first place. They might just attack again next year, or after you're home, and then all our guard work will be for nothing."

Sari rubbed her arms fearfully. "I still don't understand what grudge Lady Oria could possibly have against me."

"I don't think it's a personal grudge," Balsa said. "I think she or someone else has an interest in weakening the ties between the Aru clan lord and the Sadan Taram. That's the second reason you want to keep going, isn't it, dad?"

Jiguro didn't answer. He was looking at Sari.

Tentatively, Sari nodded. "I-- well, yes. If we give up now, we can't really call ourselves Sadan Taram anymore. We became what we are now in the Valley of the Forest King, very long ago. While the Aru clan doesn't pay us directly for performing the ritual there each year, we live on an island that the Aru clan lord gave us on sufferance. If we don't keep to our schedule and our role, we might lose our home." She wrung her hands.

Jiguro clasped Sari on the shoulder. "We have one reason to retreat, and two reasons to go on. I say we keep going. Balsa?"

Balsa nodded. Sari didn't say anything.

"Don't worry about us," Jiguro said. He squeezed Sari's shoulder. "We're guards. Our occupation is a matter of life and death . We couldn't do this work if death or battle frightened us."

Sari looked up at Jiguro. The expression on her face was difficult to interpret. Slowly, she removed Jiguro's hand from her shoulder and

stood up straight. She folded her hands over her heart and said, "It seems I am still under your protection. Three meals and forty-five copper coins a day." She bowed her head.

chapter eleven

kemiru hill

Maran sensed people moving behind him, but he didn't turn around. It was only Yukim.

"Where are they?" Maran asked.

"They'll reach the Boundary Tree soon," Maran whispered back. He still didn't turn. He had to keep his eyes on the tree and the clearing that surrounded it. He readied his bow. In the distance, he heard more people talking.

"Are Jiguro and his daughter still with them?" Maran asked.

Yukim didn't answer. Surprised, Maran finally looked over his shoulder.

Yukim was frowning. "Jiguro is sticking to the target like glue. I don't see his daughter anywhere. Maybe she stayed at the inn. Some of the Sadan Taram stayed out late drinking with the villagers. If they're hungover and she's guarding them, then maybe she's not here."

"We can't assume that," Maran said sternly "Doras underestimated her in Mahal Marsh, and look what happened." He watched the approach of the Sadan Taram for a moment, then said, "Get to your place. And make every arrow count. We do not know their plans."

Yukim bowed, then crouched down and headed into the underbrush. Doras was also hidden there. They planned to climb the trees for better visibility.

Maran took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he noticed glare on the white stone path leading up to the summit of the hill. It was past noon, and the sun was warm for the season. The woman they were targeting came up the path, defended by Jiguro, a tall warrior. Maran had to decide who would shoot first. It might be better for them all to shoot at once and break through Jiguro's defenses, but then he would be aware of all their locations. It was better to shoot one or two at a time until they harried him to a more vulnerable position on the hilltop.

The matter of the daughter not being here was troubling, but Maran didn't see that as a reason to delay what he was planning. He and his fellows were all veterans of many battles and skilled with the bow. They were well-concealed; he doubted that Jiguro or the girl had noticed any trace of their passage through the woods on the hill.

The direction of the wind changed. If the Sadan Taram had scent hounds, they might have figured out where Maran was hiding. But they didn't. The wind might push his arrows off-course slightly, but it wasn't strong enough to be a serious problem. His arrows were tipped with poison. It didn't matter where they struck the woman's body. Even one arrow would be enough to end her life.

All they would need to do then was dispose of the body in the valley far below. If they tossed it off the hill, it would be close to unrecoverable. No one would be able to prove what they'd done easily.

The Sadan Taram were close now; he heard them singing a song in Rotan. A chill went up his spine. He wanted to be at home with his wife, sitting in his own chair in front of the fire. The scarf his wife had knitted for him hung down over his right shoulder. He checked his bowstring and his quiver, making sure his arrows were in easy reach.

Movement caught the corner of his eye. He noticed Sari and Jiguro coming up the stone path, getting closer. Jiguro held his spear in his right hand and a wooden shield in his left. He was standing behind Sari, looking around. He stood so that he could react to attacks coming from every side.

Yukim and Doras were in position in the treetops. He signaled to them not to fire yet.

Then Jiguro discarded his shield. Maran frowned. They were sitting ducks now; Yukim and Doras could fire on them from above. But then Jiguro placed himself squarely behind Sari, extending his arms over her shoulders and gripping his spear. He was standing so close that they were touching, making himself into a human shield.

The wind blew through the trees. Sari pulled a small bundle out of her shirt and raised it to the sky.

It's the water harp, Maran thought.

As Sari's arms left the sheltering protection of Jiguro's bulk, two arrows raced at her exposed flesh from the trees. Jiguro deflected them both with his spear. Maran noticed that he pointed at each archer's position with his spearhead and felt a faint prickle of unease.

Then Maran drew back his own arrow, nocked it, aimed, and fired. The arrow's flight was straight and true. Jiguro could not avoid the shot.

Jiguro kicked up the wooden shield from the ground. The arrow thudded into it with a reverberation that shook the air. Then someone —Doras or Yukim; Maran couldn't tell—screamed and fell out of a tree. Maran dashed out of cover; they had to get rid of Jiguro now in order to get to Sari. He saw Jiguro crouched down beneath the shield right in front of him and aimed to take another shot.

Sharp pain pierced Maran's side before he released his next arrow. The arrow went wild, and Maran stared in utter shock at the blood blooming from an arrow wound in his side. His eyes tracked the flight of that arrow backwards. Jiguro hadn't shot it. Neither had Sari or the Sadan Taram.

It's the girl. Jiguro's daughter was here.

He was right. He watched the girl rise from a squat from below the road. She was getting closer to Jiguro; she didn't spare so much as a glance for Maran.

Was she hiding along the road the whole time, and we missed her? Maran thought. Or had she climbed up the hill from the steepest side to avoid detection? No sane person would climb up that way. It was easy to see Lagaro's grave from that direction. The grave was now exposed to the elements. Climbing up Kemiru Hill from that side was physically punishing as well as terrifying. But it was rocky, and there were handholds. An experienced mountaineer might find a small cave to hide in and wait in ambush.

Another arrow whizzed at Maran. He ducked and rolled behind a tree just in time to avoid taking another hit.

If she was lying in wait below the road, how could she see Doras and Yukim in the trees?

Jiguro was facing him, headed for him how. He swallowed heavily and said in a tone of prayer, “Teika uru... It’s over… The hunters have become the hunted.”

Jiguro pointed out the other archer to the girl, then picked up the shield with the arrow stuck in it. He advanced on Maran, moving quickly. The girl shot three arrows in quick succession, one-two-three, and Maran heard another scream from overhead.

Maran couldn’t believe his eyes. He had to get out of here, but he’d be discovered immediately if he ran. Another arrow whooshed toward him, cutting air; the tree he hid behind saved him, but he might not be so lucky again.

There were dull striking sounds from farther into the forest. Yukim and Doras were probably fighting Jiguro. He moved to help them and heard a twig snap.

The girl’s eyes locked on the tree Maran was using as cover. She sprinted at him, bow held at her side. Maran gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the pain of his wounded side. He aimed an arrow at the girl. She was so close that he couldn’t possibly miss.

The arrow flew at the girl. She saw it an instant before it connected and ducked under it in a tight roll. She thrust her bow aside and rolled again to a nearby tree where she picked up a spear. Then she sprang to her feet and kept running straight for Maran.

No. Impossible.

Not impossible. The girl flew at him, thrusting her spear into his shoulder and pinning him to the ground. She landed on him to hold him

still, her face hidden in darkness. He could see nothing of her but her white teeth in the gloom.

The girl's pin had broken off part of the arrow in Maran's side. Maran groaned and tried to twist away, but the girl held him firmly in place.

"Don't kill him." Jiguro's shadow rose behind the girl. "Tie him up so he can't use his hands. Then treat him."

Maran closed his eyes. He should have been home by the fire with his wife tonight. Tears slid down his cheeks. He couldn't return to her now. All that awaited him in the future was disgrace and dishonor. He reached for his own quiver of poisoned arrows. All he needed to do was pierce his own flesh with an arrowhead, and it would all be over.

The girl reached out and seized his hands. She was close enough now that he could see her face. Her shirt was loose, and beneath it, he saw tightly coiled rope binding her chest.

She wound rope around her chest to defend against the arrows...

Maran danced on the edge of consciousness, listening to a beautiful melody carried by the wind. Once, he thought he caught sight of his mother's face, though she had been dead for many years.

When Maran came back to awareness, the girl had finished disarming him and binding his hands. His wounds made him weak as a kitten. Even if his poisoned arrows were still in reach, he didn't have the strength to pierce himself with one.

Maran felt cold all over. The front of his shirt was soaked with blood from his spear wound. That must be why he felt so feeble and exhausted. He opened his eyes wider with effort, feeling salt crust at the

corners: proof that he'd been crying before. The last thing he saw before he passed out was dappled light on the forest leaves.

***

"Do you hear that?" Kii poked Sansa. "D'you hear? That's the Conductor singing, isn't it?" she whispered.

Sansa nodded. She sat with Kii near the edge of the clearing that held the Boundary Tree, listening to Sari sing and play her harp. A few other Sadan Taram were gathered around her, silent and subdued. They were used to climbing this hill with a whole crowd of people and having a large audience. Since everyone had been scared away from the hill, the Sadan Taram were alone.

“Quiet, Kii.” Sari opened her eyes and stopped strumming the harp. “It’s time for the ritual song.”

The Sadan Taram fell completely silent. Kii, chastened, snapped her mouth shut. Sari’s song washed over her, bright and clear and clean. Kii couldn’t see the spirits, but she thought she could feel them swirling and fluttering around her.

Kii felt something sharp graze her arm and looked around. She’d been hit by a small stone. When she looked into the woods where the stone had come from, she saw Balsa standing there.

Balsa was okay. She’d made it.

Kii’s heart pounded loud in her ears. She was so relieved. She wanted to run to Balsa, but she stayed still. If Sari had to scold her again, she might have to start the ritual song over.

Balsa gestured for Kii to come closer. Kii crept on her hands and knees until she reached the forest where Balsa was standing. The smell of blood washed over her, and she looked Balsa up and down in alarm. There was blood on her cheek, and more on her hands.

“Are you hurt?” Kii asked in a trembling voice.

Balsa shook her head. “It’s not my blood.”

“But your shirt’s cut open…” Kii poked at a slashed hole in Balsa’s shirt.

Balsa gasped in pain. “Don’t touch that.” She grimaced, more in irritation than anything. Her wound was a shallow cut: no worse. “You

shouldn’t touch me at all. The bad guys were using poisoned arrows.” She took a few deep breaths, in and out. “Anyway, your Conductor is safe. We managed to capture all the archers, but we’ll need your help carrying them all to the next town.”

Kii nodded. “Should we try staying in the area and catching more, so that they don’t try to attack us again in the Valley of the Forest King?”

Balsa shook her head. “We can’t linger. We don’t know who sent these men, and we can’t afford to pry just yet. If it turns out that the Aru clan lord is behind these attacks, then your people won’t just be in trouble this year. They’ll be in trouble forever.”

Kii swallowed heavily. “Oh.” She remembered what Sari had told her on the way up the hill. “I, uh, didn’t think of that. I understand.”

Balsa nodded sharply, then turned around and ran into the woods, swift and silent like a wild animal. Kii watched her go, feeling heavy as if a stone was lodged in her stomach.

I know I kill people for a living, but if I didn't, they would kill me.

Balsa’s remembered words turned around in Kii’s mind. Kii closed her eyes and breathed. Then she opened her eyes, turned around, and returned to her friends.

chapter twelve

the aru clan

When the Sadan Taram returned to the inn in Takua Village, they found mounted soldiers serving the Aru clan waiting for them. Sari recognized them first; their horses were tethered just outside the inn, and the soldiers themselves were walking around the yard.

“Agachi? Sir? Is that you?” Sari called out.

The man she addressed turned, smiled a little, and bowed. Balsa gave him a once-over; the last soldiers she’d seen had attacked her, after all. But they didn’t seem to be a threat.

“Who are these people?” Balsa asked.

“Retainers of the Aru clan,” Kii said softly. “Don’t worry. They aren’t bad people.”

Balsa glanced over at Jiguro. He, too, was taking stock of the soldiers. His gaze lingered on their belts, which were embroidered with the symbol of the Aru clan.

It was midday. The soldiers took rooms at the inn and interrogated the men who’d attacked the Sadan Taram. They took the time to treat their wounds as well. The Aru clan retainers invited Sari to supper to

tell her what they'd learned, and she agreed. Balsa and Jiguro were not permitted to attend, but stayed just outside the door. After dinner, Sari accompanied Jiguro and Balsa to Jiguro's room and told them what Agachi had said.

"The good news is that our letter did reach Lord Shisal," Sari said. "But just after, Lady Oria collapsed with a sickness. It was only morning sickness, but for a few days, the family was greatly concerned for her health. Our letter was briefly forgotten, and Agachi was only just sent with a reply." She smiled. "We had a bit of a tough time of it, but things should be easier now. Agachi and the others have offered to escort us until the end of our journey."

"Did the attack today have something to do with Lord Shisal?" Jiguro asked.

Sari shook her head. "Agachi denies that. He thinks that it's more likely that our attackers are just bandits. I voiced my concerns, and he promised to investigate further. I'm relieved that you were able to capture all of them alive."

Jiguro frowned deeply.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked.

Jiguro rubbed his chin. "Are you going to allow those men to guard you and your people?"

"Of course," Sari said. "Why not? You'll be working with them on the same side to defend us all. You don't think that they're secretly our enemies?"

Jiguro said nothing. His expression didn't shift.

Sari turned toward Balsa. “I haven’t gotten a chance to thank you properly.” She bowed from the waist. “Without you, we all would have died.”

A muscle jumped in Balsa’s cheek. “It’s just work.”

“Did you change your bowstring?” Jiguro asked.

“Yep. Why?”

Jiguro shook his head. “Just take care of it. That weapon’s expensive, and it will only stay supple if you string it right. I thought it was strung to tight when I saw it last.”

Balsa resisted the urge to roll her eyes. The bow had saved both their lives and he knew now that she was taking care of it, but he was always going to ask a question like that. He was always looking for a flaw or something to fix. But if he wasn’t like that, they might both be dead by now.

“You chose your hiding place well,” Jiguro said after a pause.

She shrugged. “I noticed that there were a lot of rocks along that side of the road while I was practicing archery. I figured that if I moved quick and quiet and out of sight the whole way, I could catch them by surprise.”

“I see.” Jiguro chuckled. “So you got the lay of the land ahead of time.”

Balsa waited, like she was listening for some echo, but Jiguro didn’t say anything else. *So that’s all the praise I get, huh?*

Suddenly, Balsa remembered her fear of not being able to handle the archers. She’d been so scared of getting shot and watching Jiguro fight them off on his own to protect Sari. Could he have done it, even?

The arrows of their attackers were poisoned. She hadn't even considered that Jiguro would carry a shield, but it was the most sensible precaution he could have taken.

Balsa sighed inwardly. *I may be a decent guard, but I still have a lot to learn.*

There were strains of music coming from downstairs. Kii and the others had started their evening performance.

Jiguro faced Sari squarely. "I have two questions for you."

"Yes?" Sari asked.

"Do you have to go into the Valley of the Forest King to perform your ritual, and if so, who is going to accompany you?"

Sari frowned a little. "Usually I wouldn't have to go all the way in for the ritual, but we need to repair the grave this year. I wouldn't worry too much about danger within the valley. I've never been attacked there before. I've walked through the valley for the ritual with Aru clan retainers and their lord several times, and the worst thing I ever saw was wolves keeping their distance in the trees."

Jiguro nodded thoughtfully. "Now, my second question: do you normally eat or drink anything while you're in the Valley of the Forest King?"

"We don't bring food with us," Sari said. "The ritual itself requires that we drink a sacred wine fermented with flower petals."

Jiguro remained silent for a while, considering. "You have to fix the grave, so I imagine several Sadan Taram will be accompanying you. Will they also have to drink this wine?"

“Yes,” Sari said. “Everyone who steps foot on sacred ground for the ritual must partake of it.”

Jiguro hmmed. “In that case, I have a favor to ask.”

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The journey to the Aru clan lord’s estate was blessed with fair weather, and they made excellent time. The terrain sloped downwards from Kemiru Hill.

Balsa and Jiguro remained vigilant. The road was surrounded on all sides by forest and grassland, making it easy for enemies to spring an ambush. But there were no ambushes. The autumn sun shone on the path, guiding all of them gently forward.

When the Aru clan lord’s estate appeared in the distance, the Sadan Taram sent up a cheer. The estate was familiar to them; it had been passed down by the hero Lagaro to his heirs. The estate was not large, but it was strongly built, with tall towers facing the east and west. The windows in the towers were stylized to look like stars. Lagaro and the Tahsa people had worshiped Hanma, a star goddess, long ago.

The road widened out and became smoother. It was lined by autumn flowers that extended all the way to the stone staircase leading into the estate. The flowers made the cold stone walls seem a bit less forbidding.

Kii clapped her hands. “The flowers are new,” she said to Balsa. “And the road’s been fixed. I guess Lady Oria has been making some improvements.”

They entered the estate and were greeted by servants who offered them clean rags and buckets of water so that they could make themselves a bit more presentable. The servants showed them to private rooms where they could change clothes, if they wished.

Sari alone was summoned to see the clan lord. The others were all guided to a separate wing of the estate where guest rooms were prepared for them. The rooms were a bit low-ceilinged compared to newer architecture, but they were solid stone and the floors were covered with thick, warm, embroidered rugs. The estate was not as grand as anything in southern Rota, but it was cozy and warm. Balsa looked around at old stone carvings and statues and felt the weight of history on this place.

There was a separate dining room in their guest suite that was large enough to seat everyone and then some. Servants set out baked candies and fresh fruit for them to enjoy.

It was a beautiful day outside, so all of the windows in the guest suite were open to the afternoon sun. Red flowers called risma bloomed in window boxes, filling the air with a sweet scent. They only bloomed at the start of autumn. Balsa found their familiar smell comforting.

The Sadan Taram ate and drank freely of all that was offered to them, but Balsa and Jiguro accepted only water and ate nothing.

“They’ve chilled the fruit, and this fruit juice tastes wonderful,” Kii said. “Are you sure you won’t have any?”

Balsa shook her head, and Kii looked troubled. “Does that mean that we shouldn’t have any, either?” Kii asked.

“No,” Jiguro said. “Remember who’s in danger here.”

“The Conductor,” Kii said.

“Right. They won’t poison your food, but they might tamper with hers--or ours, since we’re protecting her.”

A little while later, another servant came in and announced the arrival of Sari, their clan lord and their clan lady. The doors to the suite were swept open. The Sadan Taram rose quickly to their feet.

“I present Lord Shisal and Lady Oria,” the servant said.

The Sadan Taram bowed low.

“As you were,” the young lord said with a kind smile. “I’m sure you must be tired from your journey. My father was uncourteous enough to keep your leader from you for this long. Please, enjoy our estate’s hospitality.”

Sari smiled brightly. “It was no trouble, Lord Shisal, truly. I am glad to see that your father is doing so much better.”

Lord Shisal and his wife looked to one another uncomfortably. “There is more we should discuss,” Lord Shisal said. “A lot of unfortunate things happened last year. But come, we should all eat a little something.” He offered his arm to Lady Oria and led her over to the dining table. They sat down, and Sari sat across from them.

Balsa didn’t bow to Lord Shisal or his wife. She stared openly at them as they came closer, not in the least bit concerned for propriety or manners. Lady Oria’s hair was soft-looking and tea-colored. Her skin had a healthy glow. Her eyes were dark and piercingly beautiful.

“Are you feeling well, my lady?” Sansa asked. “We received word on the road that you were ill.”

Oria smiled. “Thank you for your concern. I am feeling quite well now. I apologize that my sudden illness caused a delay in sending back a message to you.”

Sansa waved her hand dismissively. “There’s no need to apologize, my lady. We should be offering you our congratulations. I hope your child will be born strong and healthy.”

Sansa and the other Sadan Taram congratulated Lady Oria on her pregnancy. She blushed a little and thanked everyone. “It is good that you are here,” Lady Oria said. “My child will be like you--part Tahsa, part Rotan. I can’t wait to see what they look like.”

“I’m sure the baby will be cute as a button,” Sansa said.

Some of the Sadan Taram appeared troubled. The number of Tahsa people in the province were dwindling, and the problems they’d faced over the past year cast a shadow over the happy news. Lord Shisal was of the Tahsa people, and they’d come on hard times recently.

Sari dispelled the tension in the air with a bright smile. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the Tahsa people and Rotans could meet at a Hanma festival again, under the stars? Mixed-race children are the foundation of our people. The relationships of their parents were based on tolerance and love.”

Lady Oria blushed again. She looked around the room, taking in all of the estate’s guests. Her eyes rested on Jiguro. “Sir,” she said, “forgive me if my asking is rude, but I heard from one of my servants that Sari is smitten with one of the men at this gathering. Would that be you, perhaps?”

Kii and several other Sadan Taram tittered. Jiguro's eyebrows rose. He cleared his throat, then said, "I have my own reasons for being here."

"Indeed," Lord Shisal said. "It's fortunate for us all that Sari hired such skilled help to defend the Sadan Taram on the road. I heard that you captured all three of the people who came after you on Kemiru Hill alive. That's quite an achievement."

Jiguro bowed his head modestly. "It was nothing."

"You sell yourself short," Lord Shisal said. "Was the letter true? Have you all been attacked repeatedly during your journey? How frightening."

Sari nodded gravely. "Yes. That was the third attack that we suffered on our way here."

"I see." Lord Shisal frowned deeply. "If that's the case, then they're certainly not unrelated bandit attacks."

"They weren't bandits at all," Jiguro said. "Several of the soldiers we captured claimed to be soldiers of Rota."

Lord Shisal leaned forward. "Tell me about the attacks. I want to know everything."

Jiguro told Lord Shisal about each attack in painstaking detail. Balsa listened while observing him and his wife. Lady Oria appeared genuinely concerned about the situation and didn't interrupt Jiguro during his explanation.

Jiguro completed his summary of the attacks. "We still do not understand the motives of the attackers, only their intent," Jiguro said. "Based on rumors that I've heard, I believe they might have a stake in the maharan wood trade. Or perhaps they have a vested interest in

making sure that Lagaro's grave isn't repaired. Does any of what I've said give you an idea of what we may be dealing with?" he asked.

Lady Oria ducked her head. "It pains me to say it, but my lord father has a significant stake in the maharan trade. He also doesn't want Lagaro to be reburied." She sighed. Her face was drawn and pale.

"I don't understand why he would ever command such a thing, though," Lord Shisal said. "It doesn't make any sense."

Lady Oria leaned forward slightly. "If my father truly was behind the attacks on your people, I sincerely apologize. I will do everything in my power to keep you all safe in the future. I swear it."

Sari nodded her head deeply in thanks.

Balsa wasn't sure if she believed Lady Oria's words. If her father was behind this, she might be in on it all. She tried to catch Jiguro's eye, but he didn't look away from Lady Oria or Lord Shisal. To her, it looked like he was staring through them--trying to see their secrets.

chapter thirteen

the valley of the forest king

The valley was dense with early morning fog. Agachi, a retainer of the Aru clan, crept down the path, using the fog as cover. He was scouting ahead for danger and didn't want anyone else to see him.

The previous day and night had been busy with the preparations for restoring Lagaro's grave. A number of craftsmen and materials would need to go into the Valley of the Forest King to repair it. Most of the workers were ready, but it would take a little more time to get all the materials into carts so that they could be easily moved. Right now, the first wagons were rolling in behind the craftsmen on the path behind Agachi.

Suddenly, Agachi stopped in front of a tall, white-barked nanna tree. These trees grew all around the Valley of the Forest King. Their stark whiteness looked like polished bone in the mist. The branches of the tree fluttered and then crackled in a strong breeze.

This was the point of no return. No one could venture into the Valley of the Forest King without being guided by the Sadan Taram

beyond this point. Agachi stood still and felt the wind blowing over his face. There was an old legend that the wind was the Forest King's messenger, and that it told the Forest King of everything that went on in this wooded province. Supposedly, that was why anyone who went in without an escort ended up dead or cursed.

Agachi couldn't go on, but he felt exposed standing in the middle of the path, even with the fog to help obscure his form. He was relieved when he heard the sound of the Sadan Taram's instruments echoing in the distance.

The fog parted around the path, revealing Sadan Taram men holding up pine torches and women dressed in gold-embroidered robes playing instruments. Only Sari, who was out front, was dressed in a drab gray color. Those clothes were the traditional uniform of a Sadan Taram leader, which they wore for performing spirit-easing rites in the Valley of the Forest King. Lord Shisal of the Aru clan walked next to her, clad similarly in a gray robe.

Agachi was glad that he couldn't see Lady Oria anywhere. The trek was a long one, and the Sadan Taram might still be attacked during their ritual. He also didn't know if it would be appropriate to bring a full-blooded Rotan woman on Tahsa sacred ground. He wanted her at home and safe.

I wonder if the spirit of Lagaro is angry about his grave. Agachi had thought that before, but no one knew for certain. Hopefully, they could start putting the grave to rights today.

Right after the earthquake happened, Agachi had wondered if Lagaro's spirit was angered because Lord Shisal had married Lady Oria, diluting the Tahsa presence in this province. Lady Oria was now with

child, and his reservations about her had only grown in the intervening time since the marriage. He smacked his lips together in disapproval.

No other Aru clan lord in the region had ever married a pure-blooded Rotan. It wasn't done, and it diminished the legacy and pride of the Tahsa people.

If only Lord Kamil were still alive...

Kamil, the previous lord of the Aru clan, had died in an accident with he was only eighteen years old. If he had lived, the future of the province would be brighter than it was now.

Agachi gazed at the ceremonial altar nestled in a grove of nanna trees with darkness coloring his vision. There were two nanna trees marking the path leading up to the altar; from this distance, they looked a bit like a gate.

Sari and Lord Shisal approached the altar, then gave the signal to move on. Agachi waved to the first wagon and said, "Our lord commands you to follow."

Agachi watched Sari, Lord Shisal and the wagons move down the path, vanishing into the mist like apparitions from another world. The Sadan Taram took their places behind the wagons, carrying their instruments and jugs of sacred flower wine to be used in their ceremony.

Sari was given a cup of the sacred wine. She called out, "Forest King! We ask for passage, offering you this makiri wine." Makiri was the wildflower that the wine was distilled from.

Sari passed the glass of wine to Lord Shisal, who quaffed it in a single gulp. Then Sari, the workers, and everyone else lined up in front

of wine barrels to drink their own cup of makiri wine.

After Sari drank her wine, she started humming, then began to sing. By some strange trick--maybe magic--it sounded like two different voices were resounding from her throat at the same time. The direction of the wind changed, and it didn't feel as cold against Agachi's skin. The mist swirled in and surrounded Sari, then spiraled away all at once, forming a clear space.

Sari clutched a small harp to her chest protectively as she continued to sing.

Then the world split in half.

Agachi dropped his empty cup of wine, stunned. The morning mist was burned away by bright sunlight, but the sunlight wasn't natural. It illuminated only Sari. Agachi couldn't explain it, even to himself, but it was like Sari had summoned the power of another world to herself.

Plucking the water harp, Sari walked past the altar and continued up the path, singing all the while with unnatural golden light shining all around her. Agachi and the others walked after her slowly, as if held by a dream.

As they advanced, the sound of the music faded. *It's like we're underwater or something.* The golden light around Sari flickered. When Agachi breathed in, the air seemed heavy.

The woods surrounding the Valley of the Forest King were usually dense and impassable, but the trees parted for Sari as she walked, making a way. The wind fluttered the leaves of the trees, then passed through the hole in the water harp with a sweet sound.

In the distance, the green and white of the trees were marked by a monument in gray stone. It was Lagaro's grave. Agachi sucked in a breath. The illumination around Sari lit the forest underbrush and the flat stretch of open ground surrounding the grave site.

Agachi's head felt heavy. He'd been walking for a long way, and the sight of the grave affected him deeply. His vision dimmed, and he stumbled. *I can't make it. I'm going to fall.*

In front of Agachi, Lord Shisal collapsed to his knees, then passed out. More people fell around and behind Agachi as he struggled to stay on his feet. He didn't even have time to work out what was happening. His head pounded painfully. He could barely keep his eyes open.

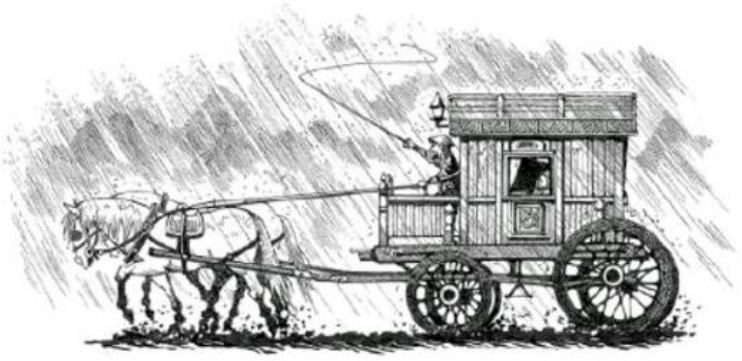
Then he heard footsteps--running?--and groaned. He opened his eyes with effort and got the shock of his life.

Lady Oria?

Agachi's eyes rolled back in his head, and he passed out.

part three

the wind's direction



chapter one

mother's pendant

Lord Azal of the Magua clan sat in state speaking to his niece and nephew as rain lashed the windows outside. The storm was a strong one; raindrops spattered the floor even through the hall's shutters. The windows were large, especially for northern Rota.

"You cannot possibly depart today," he said. "The weather is terrible."

Rumina, Azal's niece, bowed her head. "Forgive us, but we must depart. We cannot delay. The ceremony to be held in the Valley of the Forest King is scant days away, and we must make the necessary preparations."

Azal's eyebrows drew together. "Ah, yes. The Sadan Taram are due to arrive soon, are they not?"

"Yes," Rumina said. "They are due to arrive the day after tomorrow."

"I understand that they keep a very punctual schedule," Azal said. "I never understood the need for such rigor; they're simply traveling musicians."

A flash of discomfort made Kumu look away from Azal. He likely didn't enjoy hearing the Sadan Taram disparaged. Kumu and the Sadan

Taram were both descended from the Tahsa people. *He looks like one of them.* Kumu was thirteen, with thick eyebrows and a stubborn expression. It was unfortunate that he didn't see himself as part of the Magua clan, and that he so closely resembled his father's people. He looked very like the Aru clan patriarch who had passed away earlier in the year, and there was no trace of his mother's lineage in his face.

In contrast, Rumina was a representative mixture of both her parents, and her mannerisms and facial features were a lot like Oria's, who was Azal's younger sister.

Rumina lifted her head. "I'm afraid we simply cannot linger," she said. "We have three funerals to prepare for at the estate, and the Sadan Taram also have their own business to attend to."

Azal nodded indulgently. "Three funerals, you say? How unfortunate. I will speed you on your way, then."

Looking at his niece recalled his sister to Azal's mind. He had loved her, and she was dead. She would want him to take care of her children's future, and the future of the province. That was what mattered above everything.

You trusted your children into my care, Oria. I will do my best for them; I swear it.

Oria was no longer around to see to her children's futures. He understood her desires, though he hadn't told her children about them. He wasn't sure they would understand, even though he did. Keeping the secret was painful for him, but he accepted the responsibility of it as his own. This was what it meant to be the lord of a clan, and to rule his people.

Azal had resisted becoming a clan lord tooth and nail. It was never what he'd wanted for his life, but it was too late now for him to chase what he wanted. His father had been a very different kind of man. Azal suspected his father of trying to assassinate the Sadan Taram.

You are clan lord. Any ends you take justify the means. The well-being of all our people rests on your head. Never second-guess yourself or your decisions.

Azal didn't really miss his father, but he was glad that he understood his father's way of thinking. The idea that he might have to harm the Sadan Taram--or someone else--someday sickened him. Even for the sake of the province, he wasn't sure he could do something like that.

"Before that," Kumu said, stepping a little ahead of his sister. "We wrote a letter asking to amend the terms of my sister's marriage contract. Did you get it?"

His tone was rude, and this wasn't really the appropriate forum to discuss such matters. "I receive many letters," Azal said, not bothering to hide his irritation.

"I've asked for half the profits of the maharan wood trade that the Magua clan has been doing this year to be transferred to our family's estate," Kumu said.

"Half, hm? Well, I will read it over and get back to you. The trade deal we've made is significant enough that King Ihan will need to be informed. For now, you should be on your way."

Magua clan retainers escorted Azal's niece and nephew out of the room. Kumu likely thought the deal he was proposing was a good one that would provide for his future. Azal wasn't so sure. Splitting

resources on such a scale would give more power to the Tahsa faction in the province and weaken the Magua clan's influence.

I never asked to be a clan lord. He sighed.

He wished he'd been able to help his sister. Lord Shisal had been a good man, but his retainers were mainly Tahsa loyalists and didn't take kindly to what they considered a foreigner being in their midst. It was unfair of them, and even cruel, to judge Oria because of her clan, but that was what had happened. He wished he'd known more so that he could have done something to mitigate her suffering.

Azal should tell Rumina her mother's secret. Everyone thought Lady Oria had died of a sudden accident--it was true her death was sudden--but the secret lay in the Valley of the Forest King, where none but the leader of the Aru clan and the leader of the Sadan Taram could walk. Rumina had never participated in a Sadan Taram ritual. She had no idea what she would encounter in that valley.

Azal tapped his fingers against the side of his leg, thinking. Then he made his decision. "Toukul!" he called out.

The retainer entered and bowed.

Azal gave Toukul his secret orders in a hushed tone.

***

Rumina knew that they'd entered the Aru domain when the quality of the roads that their carriage rolled over became obviously worse. The roads of the Aru domain were made of white stone and well-maintained; even a flash flood wouldn't destroy the road. In contrast,

the roads in the Aru domain hadn't been repaired in so long that in many places, stone gave way to dirt. On rainy days, the dirt churned to mud, making stretches of the road impassable.

When I get married, I'll finally be able to do something about these roads, Rumina thought. She was riding alone in her carriage. Ever since her parents' accident, she and Kumu never rode together. This way, if one of them suffered the same fate as their parents, the other would survive.

It started to rain. It had been raining on the day that her parents had died. Rumina closed her eyes.

Mom… dad…

Dying… it must have been terrifying. She hoped that it hadn't hurt. She hoped that they'd died before knowing it, so that their last memories wouldn't be painful.

Hot tears fell down Rumina's face. She covered her face with her hands. She'd almost never wept when her parents were alive. She couldn't cry at home, where she could be heard and possibly witnessed. Shielded by the noise of the rain, Rumina swallowed down harsh gasps in her throat. *Mom, mom…. I miss you so much.*

If only she could see her mother one more time. She wanted to talk to her, to hug her, to feel the warmth of her mother's arms around her shoulders. If she could have that, she'd never ask for anything else.

Rumina felt the weight of stolen time. She wasn't ready to lose her parents even now, when they were already gone. They should still be with her. Her mother should have died of old age after a long decline. She should still be here so that they could talk about everything. There

were so many things Rumina wanted to say to her parents, but she'd never get the chance. When she had learned of their deaths, she'd been shocked to her core. Even now, she begged to the heavens for mercy. She wanted to unwind time and restore her family. None of this was ever supposed to happen.

Rumina imagined waking up and going to the garden where her mother sat, listening to the Sadan Taram play happy songs on their instruments. Her mother hummed along at her garden table and wove the flowers in her vase into crowns.

Rumina's mother had loved music, especially love songs. She'd called Rumina her beautiful Tol Asa child, which made Agachi and the other retainers descended from the Tahsa people nervous. Her father had tried to smooth the way for Oria, but she'd made it difficult. Whenever a bad mood was on her, she would shut herself in her room and sing love songs. She loved it when the Sadan Taram came to visit. She could spend hours talking to the leader of the Sadan Taram, Sari.

Often times, Sari would tell the story of the Tol Asa people to Rumina's mother.

A long time ago, the Tahsa people lived in Rakul Province, herding sheep and cows and growing grain. They lived peacefully with their neighbors, mostly keeping to themselves. There was no intermarriage between the Tahsa and the fledgling Rotan clans at all until one year when the two peoples decided to hold a shared festival. The festival was held in honor of Hanma, a star goddess.

Hanma was said to be the bride of the God of the Heavens. From spring until fall, she lived on the earth, blessing it with her kindness and warmth so that the plants would grow. But in winter, when demons and

monsters attacked the land, she returned to her husband in the sky for protection, only returning when the danger was past.

At the end of harvest season, it was the Tahsa people's custom to hold a festival in Hanma's honor to thank her for her bounty.

To the Rotans, this was a new custom, but a welcome one. It put them on better terms with the Tahsa people. On the night of Hanma's Festival, men and women from the Rotan clans and the Tahsa people were permitted to meet, fall in love and marry.

That story had special meaning to Rumina's mother. She was a woman from the Magua clan who had married into the Aru clan of the Tahsa people.

One year, Sari had given Rumina's mother a small pendant as a gift, which she wore forever after. Her mother wanted to hold another festival to Hanma, though of course the goddess wasn't widely venerated any longer. Rumina wished that her mother had been able to revive the festival with Sari. It would have made her so happy.

Rumina remembered the rumors that her mother had gone into the Valley of the Forest King and caused a curse on their family twenty years before. Rumina wanted to know the truth. She really hoped that Sari knew. She was looking forward to asking Sari when she visited.

Looking out the window of her carriage, Rumina bowed her head and prayed for the spirits of her parents to be at peace.

chapter two

attack

A flame-red bird soared through the sky, letting out a high-pitched call. Bright sunshine lit fields of noki grain golden. There was not a single cloud in the sky; it was like the previous night's rain had never happened.

A shallow river cut through the waves of grain, babbling merrily over stone.

"I'm waiting for the lecture," Kii said.

"What?"

"Every time we wandered into the tall grass off the road when I was a kid, you and Jiguro would always stop and remind us that visibility is poor in the grass and that it'll be much more dangerous from here on out."

Balsa's mouth quirked up in a sarcastic smile. "Seems like you remember the lecture well enough."

They had left Kemiru Hill the previous day. Eona was playing the water harp; they were on their way to Lagaro's grave and planned to stop at the Aru estate. Each step forward reminded Balsa of what had happened twenty years before, when she'd tread this same path. Some

of those memories of walking through the fields with Jiguro as they'd protected Sari were warm and comforting like a blanket, but most of her memories of that time were painful.

Jiguro was no longer of this world. His legacy lived on in her, a pale shadow. Some day her life would also end, and her only lasting impact would be on those who still remembered her. Her thoughts were dark and morbid as she walked.

The Rotan war with Talsh had left most of the northern provinces untouched by battle, but there were still signs of hard times here and there. The bandits had been bolder for the past two years, and they were more numerous than they had been before the war. Every city and village they'd passed through was suffering from food and supply shortages, to a greater or lesser degree.

But there hadn't been any fighting on their way here. The Sadan Taram weren't attacked on the road or in any of the inns where they stayed. In that way, at least, Balsa's journey with them was easier than it had been twenty years before.

Sansa was walking out front, carrying a young girl piggyback. At the back of her mind, Balsa remembered practicing her archery not too far from this place. She remembered strategizing with Jiguro until late in the evening, and missed him. She even remembered what Kii called "lectures" with a fond smile.

Places like this really are dangerous, though. An attack can come from any direction, and we wouldn't know until it was too late.

A glint of metal caught the corner of Balsa's eye. She unsheathed her spear and brought it up just in time to deflect an arrow. "We're under attack," she called out as loud as she could. "Run!"

The Sadan Taram ran in the direction of the Aru estate.

“Not that way!” Balsa yelled.

Kii, who was keeping pace with Balsa, looked at her with an expression of confusion.

“There might be an ambush! Run around it!”

Kii pushed Eona’s back, encouraging her to move faster. Eona skidded to a halt when an arrow whizzed right in front of her. It missed.

Balsa shoved Eona to keep her in motion and started to put together the attack pattern. There were two archers, each stationed opposite one another. They were struggling to shoot now because none of their targets were stationary. Eona was their target; no one else had come under fire close enough to harm them.

Sticking herself to Eona’s side, Balsa caught sight of a stand of trees on the plain that would provide a good hiding spot and vantage point for the archers. The arrows stopped coming for a moment; Balsa identified an archer’s form in a tree to the left. Balsa vaulted her spear over her shoulder and threw it at the archer. He fell straight down out of the tree with a low cry.

Balsa retrieved her spear quickly and felt an arrow flash past her. She hastened toward it, scanning the other trees for the remaining archer. She deflected the next arrow with the tip of her spear and found the next archer, who was on the ground, crouched in bushes. She stabbed his arm to make him drop his bow, and he surrendered. She picked up his weapon and quiver.

The archers taken care of, Balsa returned to Eona and the Sadan Taram. Three men were coming up the main road from the direction of

the Aru clan's estate, armed and armored. The archers were a distraction, and probably expected to fail. As she ran, Balsa readied one arrow, then another, and watched as the closest two attackers collapsed like stones with arrows in their legs.

Her third arrow missed. One of the wounded men struggled to his feet. She was close enough to fight them face to face, then, so she threw down her borrowed bow and brought her spear to bear against them.

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Balsa killed the first two attackers with sprays of blood that made Kii gasp. Then Balsa bent down to a wounded man and cuffed him sharply behind the neck so that he passed out. Jiguro used to move the same way. Kii took an involuntary step backward, awed and a little afraid.

Jiguro had been broader than Balsa, and taller. But when Balsa wound her unconscious prisoner's arm around her own neck and started carrying him, Kii saw Jiguro in the set of Balsa's shoulders and the firmness of her stride. Taking a prisoner this way was also something Jiguro would have done.

Balsa set the prisoner down at the edge of the Sadan Taram's impromptu camp, then cleaned and sheathed her spear. The battle had been short; Balsa wasn't even out of breath. "Kii," she said, "can you carry Eona?"

"Carry me?" Eona asked, surprised. "I'm not hurt badly. I can still walk." She was pale and trembling, but none of the attackers had

reached her. There was a shallow gash on her arm where an arrow had grazed her.

“It’s okay, Conductor,” Kii said. “You’re light, so if Balsa says I should carry you for a while, I can.”

“But is it wise to stop at the Aru clan estate now?” Sansa asked.

“We’ll scout ahead,” Balsa said. “Sansa, follow me. The rest of you, follow more slowly. We’ll double back if we encounter any threats.”

Kii nodded. She wondered why Balsa wanted her to carry Eona. Ordinarily, Balsa would have carried Eona herself if she was so concerned.

Kii remembered the last time she’d seen Balsa in a fight against archers: her clothing torn, her hands moving fast as she worked to deflect the projectiles with her spear.

Kii asked Eona to hop on her back, then started walking.

“I really can walk, you know,” Eona mumbled.

“There might be danger,” Kii said. “Besides, I’ve carried you plenty of times before.”

Eona laughed. “Sure, but I was a kid then. I don’t need it now.”

Kii quickened her pace. They had to reach the Aru clan estate. Eona and the Sadan Taram would be safe and welcome behind the estate’s walls. She was burning with impatience to arrive.

The towers of the estate towered over the trees.

“My toes are asleep,” Eona said. “Kii, let me down.”

“Not yet,” Kii said. The estate was just ahead, so Balsa should be nearby. “Balsa!” she called out. “We’re here!”

Balsa ran up to them, all but silent. She nodded in satisfaction. “I’ll take over from here, Kii. Hold my spear for a moment.”

Kii set Eona down and accepted Balsa’s spear. Balsa picked up Eona and settled Eona’s weight on her own back. Then she took back her spear from Kii, using it as a walking stick.

Almost, Kii didn’t let go of the spear. The warmth of Balsa’s hands was still on it, providing something like reassurance. But Balsa wrenched it back, leaving Kii’s hands cold.

As she hurried after Balsa and Eona, Kii brought her palms together and prayed silently. *Great goddess Hanma, keep Eona safe. Please.*

chapter three

yurima

When Rumina got home, her brother was waiting for her in the entryway.

“Sister!” Kumu was still dressed in his travel clothes. “The Sadan Taram were attacked on the road! Their leader was poisoned by an arrow!”

“Their leader? You mean Sari?”

Kumu shook his head. “It’s not Sari this year. She’s ill, so she stayed on the Sadan Taram’s island this year. It’s her daughter, Eona.”

Rumina approached her brother and set a shaking hand on his shoulder. “Where is Eona now?”

“She’s resting,” Kumu said. “I had the servants fetch Marul the herbalist, but he doesn’t seem to be anywhere on the estate.”

Agachi, one of their retainers, spoke up. “He told me he was going out this morning to gather mashiri. He hasn’t returned yet. Mashiri brings down fevers. Several of the children in the village and household are sick with something. He took all his apprentices with him, too.”

“What terrible luck,” Rumina said. “Kumu, we should call Yurima.”

Agachi started when he heard the name. Rumina ignored him.

Yurima was one of Lady Oria's servants. She had accompanied Oria from her home at the Magua clan estate after her marriage. She had a thorough knowledge of herb lore and medicine. When Lady Oria was alive, Yurima had often treated Rumina and Kumu's colds and fevers.

Yurima was retired now and lived quietly on a small piece of farmland just outside the estate with her husband. She hadn't returned to the Magua clan after Lady Oria's death.

"Kumu!" Rumina cried out. "Send a message to Yurima, right now! There's no time to waste!"

Agachi looked askance at Kumu, who nodded shallowly at him. Agachi went to fetch Yurima to the estate.

***

Kumu stalked down the hallway, adjusting his sleeves while peering at each face he passed like he was expecting to see a ghost. He had no desire to see Yurima again. As far as he was concerned, Yurima was complicit in his mother's crimes. For all he knew, Yurima was responsible for the curse on the Aru clan and not his mother.

Rumina didn't want Kumu to think that way, but all the rumors flying around were very difficult to ignore. Kumu knew that Agachi didn't like Yurima--he considered her a spy for the Magua clan, and said that she hadn't gone back home after the death of Lady Oria because she was feeding their enemies information.

Even if that was the case, Kumu couldn't deny that they needed someone like Yurima here now. When he was a small child, Yurima had often given him bitter medicines when he was sick. He hadn't liked the taste, but he also hadn't died, either. She'd always been kind to him while she'd lived at the estate. Kumu had felt the loss of Yurima when she was gone. He was a child, and considered her leaving a form of betrayal that fed in to Agachi's ideas about her.

Kumu couldn't greet Yurima as a friend or as a caretaker: not since she'd quit the estate to live elsewhere. He didn't want to see her ever again if he could help it.

But he needed her to come, and Agachi might easily find some excuse not to bring her back. He called out to a girl carrying water down the hall. She set down her load and bowed a little. "Yes, lord?"

"Find Yurima the herbalist and bring her here."

***

Yurima received an urgent message from the Aru clan's estate, made her excuses and rushed there. She was led to the room where her patient waited: a young woman stretched out on a hard bed with a jagged wound on her arm. She was deathly pale, but conscious and capable of movement. Yurima had been told that her name was Eona.

"Please describe all the symptoms you've suffered," Yurima said, kneeling down next to Eona. "It will help me know how to treat the poison."

Eona spoke quietly. Rumina was sitting nearby, looking on. “Do you know how to treat this, Yurima?”

Yurima shrugged. “The poison is either a very low dose or slow-acting. That’s good. But I don’t know what it is, or if I can touch the wound to clean it. I won’t know all the dangers associated with this poison until I identify it.”

“Just treat the arrow wound.” Agachi was also in the room, and now he addressed Yurima in an irritated tone. “You’ve done that for others before… Nikul, was it? Don’t touch the cut with your bare hands and there shouldn’t be an issue.”

“He’s right,” Rumina said. “It’s not like you to hesitate in treating a wound, Yurima. What’s wrong?”

Yurima smiled feebly. “I suppose I’m out of practice.”

The other Sadan Taram glanced nervously at one another. That probably wasn’t the best thing for Yurima to say.

“But I’ll do what I can,” Yurima said. “I brought a number of antidotes to common poisons; we can start with those. Give me a moment to gather some supplies.”

Yurima left the room. Afternoon shadows lengthened over the floor. She found her old quarters and was relieved to find many of her tools and supplies where she’d left them when she’d lived on the estate. But familiar tools and surroundings didn’t make this situation any easier for her.

What should I do? She stifled a cry as she rifled through herbs. It was fortunate that Eona’s wound was shallow and that the wound was

far from her heart. She had seen poisonings of this kind before; most victims were lucky to last a day after being wounded.

Yurima had been tasked to save Eona, and there was still plenty of time to do that. However, if Eona lived, she would guide Rumina to the Valley of the Forest King. Rumina would discover her mother's long-held secret. Yurima wasn't sure she wanted that to happen.

Lord Azal must have feared this. Who else would try to poison the Sadan Taram? Yurima thought. She understood his reasoning. Rumina, Kumu and the last remnants of the Aru clan shouldn't have to suffer anything more. There were some secrets that should stay buried.

What should I do? Such a terrible choice: save a woman's life and risk my mistress' ire from beyond the grave, or let the woman die to keep the secret hidden?

Well, she'd been ordered to at least try to do something for Eona, so she rummaged through a few cupboards, looking for dried dagoi beans that she could cook and use as a base for a simple antidote.

Then Yurima heard the door of her own chambers shut behind her and went very still. "Who's there?" she asked.

There was a woman standing in front of Yurima's closed door. "Who are you?" She must have come in with Eona, but Yurima didn't know her name.

"Don't you recognize me?" The woman's expression was calm, but her posture was rigid. There was something vaguely threatening in her demeanor.

"I'm sorry, should I?"

“We met twenty years ago,” the woman said. “I guess it’s not a surprise that you’ve forgotten me. But we don’t have time to discuss the past right now.” She crossed the room, locating the dagoi beans easily as if she’d known exactly where they would be. “Cook these, quickly,” she said.

Yurima’s eyes widened. *She knows how to treat this poison.*

That took the decision of saving Eona out of Yurima’s hands. She bowed her head a little and said, “Might I ask you to do it? I’d be grateful for your help.” She sat near the dying fire in the room and stoked it. The woman poured water from a pitcher into a kettle. She tossed the dagoi beans in when the water was just about to boil.

“You know a little about making medicine,” Yurima observed.

“My husband is an herbalist.” The woman stirred the beans in the pot. “I know what happened with your mistress twenty years ago. Lady Oria.”

Yurima’s eyes went wide. This woman wasn’t one of the Sadan Taram. She was accompanying them as--

“You’re a guard,” Yurima said. “The daughter of the caravan guard who came here twenty years ago. I remember you now.”

The woman nodded. “Well, that’s that. Finish preparing the beans and use them to save Eona.”

Yurima nodded rapidly. Once the beans started cooking, a film would form on top. It was important not to overcook the beans or to cook them at too high a temperature, since that affected what impurities would rise to the top. The strained scum of dagoi beans was

effective against many kinds of poison. Yurima's aunt had taught her that when she was a child.

As she waited to skim the beans, Yurima sat next to the fire and recalled her younger days working for Lady Oria when she still lived at the Magua clan's main estate. Lady Oria had been ecstatic in love and had longed to come to this remote estate in the far north of the province. For her part, Yurima had tried to share in her mistress' joy. Over time, she'd made a home for herself here, but there were still times when she missed her youth. She'd believed in better futures then than the ones she saw now.

The words of Yurima's aunt returned to her as she watched the beans boil over the fire. *The taste is bitter and repulsive, but it repels the poison, too. My gran always said the worse it tastes, the better it works.*

There was film to skim now. Yurima picked up a small pot to collect the dagoi bean leavings in and tasted it. It was bitter like her aunt said--bitter like her memories. Her aunt, Lady Oria, and so many of the people she'd cared about were no longer of this world.

Yurima placed a lid on the pot of beans and waited to collect more antidote for Eona's antidote. She didn't take her eyes off the fire for a long time.

chapter four

what lies buried

Eona's recovery was swift. By early evening, she was able to sit up and eat raku stew by herself. The Sadan Taram moved around her like chicks around a mother hen. They brought her tea, blankets, food--anything she asked for, though she didn't ask for much. She was too tired.

As darkness fell, Eona and the other Sadan Taram gathered around a large fire set against the chill of the season. The seasoned firewood gave off a sweet scent in the gloom.

"I'm exhausted," Eona said.

"Me, too," Sansa said. "It's just about time to go to bed."

A bell rang at the door. Kii, Rumina, Kumu and a few servants carrying trays of dinner entered the large room. Rumina dismissed the servants, then approached Eona with Kumu at her side. Yurima was seated next to Eona and rose to her feet as Rumina came closer. Rumina took over Yurima's seat. Kii brought over a chair for Kumu to sit in.

"How are you feeling?" Rumina asked Eona.

"Much better," Eona said. "Please don't concern yourself. I'm fine."

Rumina smiled. “I’m glad. But are you certain you’re well enough to travel? We must depart for the Valley of the Forest King no later than the day after tomorrow.”

Eona’s face clouded over. She was thinking. Her duties as the leader of the Sadan Taram required her to travel for the ceremony, but she was still recovering from the day’s attack and from poison. She seemed uncertain about her own capabilities for the immediate future.

“We might have to delay the ceremony this year,” Eona said. “I’m sorry. But I should be up and around in a few days.”

“Don’t apologize,” Rumina said. “Even if we miss the timing this year, there’s always next year.”

Kumu glanced over at his sister. “Are you planning on attending the ceremony in the Valley of the Forest King next year, too?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Rumina asked with a little frown. “If I’m not here because of my marriage, you’ll go in my place.”

Kumu gritted his teeth. “And what if I’m not here next year, either?”

Kii looked between the two siblings, alarmed. “Is there a reason why you won’t be here next year?” she asked, a little too loud. She bowed, then apologized for interrupting.

Rumina shook her head. “We came here to talk to you all about that. Apologies are unnecessary.” Rumina told the Sadan Taram about her upcoming marriage into the Magua clan and that she and her brother feared that her uncle would force the dissolution of their family.

“I want to use my marriage into the Magua clan to make things better here,” Rumina said. “If my brother stays behind and becomes the new leader of the Aru clan, then our line can continue.”

“Why can’t you do that?” Kii asked.

“It’s part of the terms of my marriage agreement,” Rumina said. “When I marry into the Magua clan, the Aru clan will be absorbed into it. There doesn’t seem to be any way around that.” She shook her head. “My uncle is powerful, and he claims that this clause is for the good of Rota and all the clans. If I opposed him, I would have no support.”

Rumina frowned. “And we don’t have the means to oppose him here, either. The maharan forests in the province that once helped our economy have been gutted by last year’s trade deals. We have no resources or money to go on the defensive. Our father’s work will come to nothing, it seems.”

Kumu stood up from his chair, incensed. “We can’t just give up! The other Rotan lords must have poisoned our uncle’s thoughts against our clan. We have to protect the pride and legacy of the Tahsa people--that’s the only thing that’s important!”

Rumina shook her head sadly. “We have no proof of a conspiracy, and even if we did, I think we’d only be delaying the inevitable.”

“We have plenty of proof!” Kumu fumed. “Our mother was one of them, and she started working against us from the start! Now our uncle and the others are finishing what she started--”

“Kumu!” Rumina interrupted him angrily.

“Kumu… is right,” Yurima said quietly. All eyes in the room turned to her.

“What do you mean?” Rumina asked. “He can’t possibly be right.”

Yurima wrung her hands in her lap. Her eyes wouldn’t fix on anyone. She settled for looking at the fire. “Lady Oria never harmed

anyone on purpose," Yurima said. "There was no one kinder than her. But she suffered for her kindness. She suffered because of the harsh times we live in. They changed her. Made her do something she never would have otherwise."

Yurima's knuckles went white as she clenched her fists in her lap. "I've heard the same rumors as Agachi about Lady Oria. People say that she went to the Valley of the Forest King and cursed the Aru clan."

Kumu nodded sharply.

"The rumors against your mother have turned you against her. That would cause her great pain, if she were living. But I can't blame you for thinking ill of her when no one ever told you the truth." Her lips trembled. She looked like she was about to cry.

"Kumu, the rumors you've heard are true," Yurima said.

Rumina appeared shocked.

"Or rather," Yurima continued, "they are half-true. Lord Agachi has interpreted the rumors according to his own thinking. Those of us who were there all those long years ago didn't all see the same thing. And what we did see…" She paused. "It is difficult to explain."

"Are you accusing Agachi of twisting the truth?" Kumu asked.

"Not exactly," Yurima said. "All of the people who entered the Valley of the Forest King were drugged to sleep. They drank cups of sacred wine that were laced with the drug. And Lady Oria was behind that." Yurima looked at her hands. She didn't want to remember what happened next.

"Lady Oria wanted to sneak into Lagaro's grave while it was still open to the world. That's why she did it," Yurima said. She struggled

with her words, opening and closing her mouth. “She needed to reach the grave without being seen by Lord Shisal or any of their servants and retainers.”

“Why did she do that?” Kumu asked. “What was she trying to hide from our father and our clan?”

Yurima flinched at his tone and looked down. “She didn’t want them to see Lagaro’s remains.”

Kii gasped. “You know what happened in the Valley of the Forest King all those years ago?”

“Some,” Yurima said. “Don’t you know as well? You’re Sadan Taram; some of your must have been there that day as well.”

“Yes, but I wasn’t awake for most of it, and Sari never told us anything.”

Balsa nodded. “It was her choice not to say anything.”

“All she told me was that there was no more curse on the province and that Lagaro’s body had been laid to rest once more,” Sansa said.

“Yeah,” Balsa said. “There were a lot more Sadan Taram back then than there are now. I think she was trying to be careful about who she told so that the secret wouldn’t slip.”

“Who are you?” Rumina asked.

Balsa stood up straight, then bowed from the waist. “I’m Balsa, the Sadan Taram’s hired guard. My father was also in the Valley of the Forest King that day.”

“So you guarded Sari?”

“Yes,” Balsa said. “At the time, Sari’s life was being targeted.”

“Targeted? By whom?”

“By assassins sent by the Magua clan,” Balsa said.

“You know, then,” Yurima said. Her expression was guarded. “You know what Lady Oria did that day, when even the people closest to Sari don’t know.”

Balsa shrugged. “You learn a lot about an employer as a guard. I know more than my own fair share of secrets. And I keep them because running your mouth off is a good way to get yourself killed.”

“Have you truly kept silent for so long?” Yurima asked. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. She hugged herself, seeking comfort. “How could you bear it? How could anyone bear it?”

Yurima’s tears spilled down her cheeks onto the floor.

chapter five

yurima's confession

Yurima covered her face with her hands and wept, shoulders shaking. Her words came out broken and interrupted as she sobbed, “Lady Oria! Lady Oria, forgive me. I cannot keep this secret any longer. And even if you were alive, it would come to the same thing.” She wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands and composed herself with great effort.

“Sari was attacked by assassins from the Magua clan,” Yurima said. “So was Eona. That was who attacked her today. You have every reason to doubt me; I have no real proof. But I do know Lady Oria’s secret. I always intended to take it to the grave.” Yurima’s eyes went distant, like she was looking at something far away, but there was nothing there. Eona sat up on her sickbed, alarmed at Yurima’s outburst, but she didn’t say anything.

“Lady Oria told me many times that I was never to tell any of the Aru clan’s Tahsa retainers about what happened that day at Lagaro’s grave. The earthquake was tragedy enough. Nothing so terrible had ever happened in the Valley of the Forest King. The valley is well-defended; only the leader of the Sadan Taram and the leader of the Aru clan can open a way for others to travel there. “

Yurima frowned deeply. “When Lady Oria heard that Lagaro’s grave was broken and in need of repair, she sent a message to her father, asking what she should do. His answer to her message troubled her. Before Sari and the other Sadan Taram arrived that year to travel to the valley, she called for me and ordered me to perform a secret task without an explanation. Shortly after, Sari arrived, and Lady Oria greeted her as usual.”

Yurima wiped new tears from her face. “Oh, if only that earthquake had never happened! What a terrible year that was! Sari and the Sadan Taram had been harried by attackers all the way to this estate. They’d sent for help, but because Lady Oria had collapsed from severe morning sickness, the estate was slow to respond.

“The task Lady Oria gave me was to lace the ceremonial wine the Sadan Taram use in their ceremony with a sleeping draught. She wanted Sari to open the way safely into the Valley of the Forest King so that there would be no danger of attack from the Forest King’s defenders. In addition to that, she wanted to complete her own task without being observed.

“I begged her not to travel into that terrifying valley herself. I feared for her safety and that of her unborn child. But Lady Oria would not be dissuaded.” Yurima’s eyes overflowed with tears. “She really was a wonderful person.”

“No she wasn’t,” Kumu barked in irritation. “She made you poison a bunch of people and sneaked into the Valley of the Forest King to desecrate my ancestor’s grave! Stop weeping and get to the point!”

Rumina put up a hand, requesting silence. “What was our mother planning to do in the Valley of the Forest King?”

“What her father told her to do,” Yurima said. “She was there preserve the bond between the Magua clan and the Aru clan by killing the leader of the Sadan Taram--Sari.”

“What?” Kii rose to her feet. “What does your petty clan feud have to do with my people?”

“Quiet, Kii,” Sansa said, tugging at Kii’s sleeve.

“I’m not sure...” Kumu frowned. “Maybe it has to do with Lagaro himself. Everyone suspects he was poisoned, and most people think that it was by paja. Paja kills relatively slowly and mimics the symptoms of illness, so it’s difficult to identify until it’s too late. The custom of dining with one’s fellow clan lords at the start of every official visit originated because of the peculiar circumstances around Lagaro’s death. Breaking bread together is considered polite etiquette and is a precaution against being poisoned by an enemy.

“The poison is odorless and tasteless. However, people who have died of it have a speckled pattern on their bones that twists around them like snakes. Some other famous assassination victims in history have speckled bones that tell us what killed them. Because of this unique pattern, paja poison is sometimes called serpent venom. Even burning the bones doesn’t get rid of the pattern.”

“I still don’t understand,” Kii cut in.

“Every child of a Rotan clan knows about this poison. We’re cautioned about it when we first learn to practice weapons. But there’s no proof that Lagaro was killed by paja poison. His grave is in a remote location; not just anyone can go there. And until the year of the earthquake, his body was covered and enclosed. No one who entered would desecrate a corpse, even to expose a secret like that.

“But the earthquake took care of that. When my mother and Sari visited the Valley of the Forest King that year, what they saw was proof of Lagaro’s assassination by the Rotans--by the Magua clan, long ago. That’s the secret, isn’t it?”

Kumu looked at Yurima. He was no longer angry. He was simply saddened. He started to cry. “I hate them,” he said. “I hate the Magua clan! I hate that I’m related to them at all!”

Yurima stared at Kumu, her face set in grim lines. The room lapsed into choked silence.

“Well, that’s one theory,” Balsa muttered under her breath.

Kumu’s eyes fixed on her. “What?”

chapter six

threats

"What do you mean, 'theory?'" Kumu asked the female bodyguard standing in the corner. "What else could my mother and the Magua clan be hiding if it wasn't proof of Lagaro's assassination?"

Balsa shrugged. "I have no doubt he was assassinated. But there are plenty of reasons that the Valley of the Forest King is mysterious and remote. All I'm saying is that it holds more secrets than collection of speckled bones--and even that secret is subject to interpretation."

"Interpretation? What interpretation? Isn't it obvious what happened?"

Balsa shook her head. "Lagaro died hundreds of years ago. The speckled patterns on his bones can reveal how he died, perhaps, but not who poisoned him. You're assuming that the Magua clan did it because it suits your bias. Just like Agachi assumed your mother was going to the Valley of the Forest King to curse your family."

"But the proof is there, in that valley!" Kumu insisted. His lips trembled. "Our mother stole his bones and hid them so that our retainers wouldn't see the evidence of her family's evil deed. How could Agachi see that as anything but a betrayal against the Aru clan--against *us*?"

“You’re wrong!” Yurima cried. She tottered to her feet. “Your mother never betrayed you! Everything she did was for your sake, and the sake of your sister!”

“Liar!”

“It’s not a lie!” Yurima’s hands clenched and unclenched. “This happened before you were both born--you couldn’t possibly remember--but this province was once in dire straits. Even worse than it is now. The leader of the Magua clan--Lady Oria’s father--was making all kinds of trade deals to log our maharan forests. They were cut too fast and not replenished, and we are still suffering from the impacts of that today. He permitted his daughter to marry Lord Shisal because it would allow him to gain a tighter hold over the maharan wood market. He couldn’t allow the secret of Lagaro’s death to be exposed. If that happened, the Aru clan and the Magua clan would sever ties, and he would lose control of much of his trading empire.

“But that wasn’t why Lady Oria agreed to hide Lagaro’s body from prying eyes. She did it for you, Kumu, and for Rumina, and her husband, whom she loved deeply. She didn’t want to make Lord Shisal choose between her and his ancestral duty, and she didn’t want to put a black mark on her children’s names for being part of the Magua clan. You believe everything Agachi said about her, but couldn’t you at least try to believe that your mother loved you, if only a little?”

“Why should I?” Kumu said. “Everything you’ve said paints her as a terrible person.”

Yurima sighed. “There was no curse on the Aru clan after that. When you were born, the province was prosperous, and all of our lives were improving. Do you know why?”

Kumu frowned and shook his head.

“Because your mother threatened your grandfather. She said that if he didn’t transfer all of his trade deals and holdings in maharan wood over to her, then she would expose the secret of Lagaro’s death.”

“Expose it? He already knew the secret,” Kumu said.

“She threatened to tell King Yosam.”

Rumina nodded in understanding. “If she’d told him, our grandfather would have been forced to pay reparations for the crime, since he was the head of the Magua clan. He would lose his trade deals along with his reputation. He might have even lost his position as clan lord, if our mother had told. And even if he hadn’t, the largest trader of maharan wood aside from this province is in the south. Exposing the secret to King Yosam would have completely cut the Magua clan off from a lot of domestic trade.”

Rumina nodded to herself. “I knew mother was active in the maharan wood trade, but I never knew why.” She frowned. “Still, I suppose she was helping herself, as well. She was still her father’s daughter. Revealing the secret would have ruined her father and her entire family, except for us.”

“I think this is an opportunity,” Kumu said.

“What?” Rumina asked.

“We can blackmail our uncle with the same secret. That way, you won’t have to marry--or if you do, we don’t lose our clan to dissolution. I say we go to the Valley of the Forest King to confirm what happened to Lagaro with our own eyes. Then we’ll be able to do what our mother did, and restore prosperity to our people.”

Rumina reddened. She looked to Yurima. “Are Lagaro’s bones still in the Valley of the Forest King? Or did my mother conceal them elsewhere?”

“I don’t know,” Yurima said. “You have no reason to believe me, but I swear that it’s the truth. I have no idea where your mother hid the bones.” She turned to face Eona. “You and your people have suffered so much through all of this... I’m terribly sorry. I thought that if I told, the Magua clan would visit its wrath upon us here. It was cowardly of me.”

“Yes,” Kumu said, “but you also weren’t in the valley that day. She,” he said, pointing at Balsa, “was there. So tell me: do you know where my mother hid Lagaro’s bones?”

Balsa shook her head. “Sorry, I don’t know, either. I accompanied the Sadan Taram to the entrance of the Valley of the Forest King, but my father ordered me not to drink the sacred wine or to enter the valley under any circumstances. He had me crouch down behind some trees so that I wouldn’t be seen, then entered the valley along with Sari and Lady Oria. So I didn’t see what happened after that.”

“Why did your father tell you not to enter the valley?” Kumu asked.

“Did your father know that the sacred wine would put everyone to sleep?” Rumina asked.

Balsa shrugged. “It was a guess. We knew that everyone who was going into the Valley of the Forest King had to drink the wine, and that there were bad people after Sari. My dad had me stay behind as a precaution.” She faced Kii. “Remember when we visited this place twenty years ago? Jiguro and I didn’t eat or drink anything.”

Kii nodded. “Yes, I remember.”

“Jiguro didn’t drink the sacred wine, either. He pretended to drink it, that’s all. He told Sari to do the same.”

Sansa and Kii exchanged troubled glances.

“So they didn’t fall asleep,” Rumina said.

Balsa nodded. “Four people were awake in the valley that day.”

“Four?” Rumina asked. “There was our mother, Sari, your father... and who?”

“Your father, Lord Shisal. He woke up.”

chapter seven

eona's story

Yurima blinked. “Is that true? Did Lord Shisal truly awaken from the sleeping draught?” She stumbled back into a chair. “I never knew that.” She shook her head. “No, it’s impossible. Lady Oria didn’t want her husband to know. He couldn’t possibly have known.”

Rumia looked between Yurima and Balsa. “Is it true, though? Did our father really witness what our mother did?”

Balsa nodded. “My father didn’t tell me everything, but he did say that Lord Shisal removed the bones from Lagaro’s grave, not your mother. He didn’t want her to risk being cursed, so he took the risk upon himself. Lagaro’s bones were greatly damaged from age and exposure. Lord Shisal had prepared a small box to conceal them in. My father witnessed all of this, of course, but he didn’t tell anyone. Why would he? We’re guards. His most important objective was to save Sari’s life. The Magua clan’s secrets didn’t mean anything to him. And he never learned where your parents kept the box. They swore to keep it secret and keep it safe, and that was good enough for my father and Sari.”

“Why didn’t they tell us?” Kumu wailed. “If we knew where the box was now, we’d be able to save ourselves!”

Rumina considered. “It was too dangerous to let us know. It’s possible that they would have told us when you were of age, since we would be helping to govern the province. We’ll never know what they intended for sure.” She shook her head. “But I don’t think I would have been able to look my grandfather in the eyes if I knew. Or my uncle Azal. I think our parents were waiting until we were old enough to handle the secret.”

“I wish I didn’t know,” Rumina said. “How can I marry into the Magua clan now? It’s just too awful.”

“As to that,” Balsa said, “I really don’t think that the Magua clan was solely responsible for Lagaro’s death. When I was younger and heard about Lagaro, I found his story suspicious. The Tahsa people and the Magua clan had been at war for ages, and Lagaro stood up and told them to stop. So, both sides had a motive. But that’s not all. The Magua clan paid his funeral expenses and the Tahsa people selected his resting place, but they buried him together and spread the same story. That smacks of complicity. If the same thing had happened today, I would say that the Tahsa people and the Magua clan had planned it together.

“My father agreed, for what it’s worth,” Balsa said. “There’s not a lot to do on the road besides talk.”

Balsa faced Kumu. “I learn a lot of secrets in this line of work, whether I like it or not. And I see a lot of perspectives. A merchant sees a competitor as an enemy. A rival guard seeks to improve his reputation and challenges his allies. Everyone thinks they’re on the right side of things, but reality is more complicated than that. I think those ancient Tahsa people and the Magua clan made the best they could out of the situation they designed. Lagaro’s death ended centuries of war. The

conquest of the Tahsa people in Rota has been slow and unceasing, but it's not because Tahsa people are dying in war. It's because the Tahsa people have integrated."

Balsa shrugged a little. "Maybe you think it's a tragedy, but I think the ancient Tahsa people would prefer that to outright slaughter. In open war, everyone suffers. No one has a chance to live their lives. So stop seeing your ancestors as irredeemable villains and start seeing them as people trying to do the best they could. That's probably closer to the truth."

Balsa sighed heavily. "But it doesn't matter. You people cling to your secrets and old bones, and it almost got Sari killed twenty years ago. If that had happened, Eona would never have been born. And because your uncle still feels the secret will leak, he's trying to kill Eona. Where will it end?"

"Do you really think that the Magua clan is after our leader again?" Kii asked.

"It's hard to say for sure, but I don't have any other ideas," Balsa said. "I suspect that Lord Azal fears that Rumina and Kumu will go to the Valley of the Forest King and find the box. Their parents probably left it for them, but I don't know."

"And killing Eona would block our path to the Valley of the Forest King," Rumina said. "The valley would forever be locked to us, if there was no Sadan Taram leader to open it. That does seem to suggest that the box is there."

Balsa nodded. "I'm not sure you should do anything about it, though. Your parents left it there and never told you about it for a reason. Whether to use the secret or not is up to you, but I think it's a

risk. Telling will change everything for you, and it might not be for the best."

"Why not?" Kumu asked.

"You would make your mother's family suffer."

"But if I don't use them, then the Aru clan disappears forever. I can't *not* use them, right?"

Balsa shook her head. "I can't decide that for you. If I were in your place, I wouldn't use them. Deliberately bringing down suffering on others rarely ends well. Even if things work out for your province, your conscience will bother you eventually." She paused, then said, "There's another reason, too."

"What is it?" Rumina asked.

"A long time ago, the leader of the Magua clan--your grandfather--started building up his trade empire with maharan wood. The same year Sari traveled here after the earthquake, he was already consolidating his wealth and power. Then your mother's threat came, and it shocked him enough to send assassins after Sari in secret, so that no one could recover the bones. Those assassins covered their tracks well and gave no names, so it would be hard to prove that the Magua clan was behind the attacks. Then as now, the Magua clan is established and respected. The Aru clan may have respect, but it has little clout.

"Think about it. Lagaro's bones are no longer in his grave. That much is certain. What do you think would happen if you told King Ihan and he came to the Valley of the Forest King to investigate? He'd find a box of bones. How could you even prove they were Lagaro's bones? With Rakul Province in the state it is now, you have no standing, no

power, no friends. No one would vouch for you. People would say you were trying to trick the king so that you could unseat the Magua clan."

Rumina nodded cautiously. "That's why our parents put the bones in a box, instead of just re-burying them. They wanted to create doubt. Just in case anyone did come looking for evidence one day."

"But what if he did believe us?" Kumu asked.

"That might be worse," Rumina said. "If King Ihan believed us and granted us power and authority over the Magua clan's trade network and partners, the Magua clan would still have friends. They would call for aid. It could turn to war." She took a deep breath. "I believe this is the outcome that my uncle most fears. If our retainers all knew the truth about Lagaro's death and assumed the Magua clan was behind it, they would revolt. They are few, but they are valiant, and they have families elsewhere. What begins as a spark here could spread the fire of revolution."

Rumina buried her face in her hands. When she looked up, her expression was resolved. "Our uncle is not an evil man. He would never order the assassination of an innocent woman unless there was no other choice."

Kii snorted. All eyes in the room went to her.

"Sorry," she said, not sounding sorry at all, "but your uncle ordered Eona's death, and that sounds pretty evil to me."

"That's not true, Kii," Eona said. She was still pale from being poisoned, but she was able to sit up unassisted. "Lord Azal is not evil. I doubt his predecessor was, either. We are Sadan Taram. We travel ancient battlefields and keep the stories of old wars alive. This is our

duty and our privilege; we owe it to the spirits under our care to grant them rest. But to the living, all we do is open old wounds and old memories. Our presence foments old divisions between the Tahsa people and the Magua clan. I've been thinking about it all while everyone was talking, and I understand why Lord Azal would consider me a threat. I'm the key and the door to a war that was over a long time ago. It's not wrong-headed to try to forget something like that."

Eona paused, searching for words. "But I also have a duty to the living. When my mother passed the water harp into my keeping, she had tears in her eyes. She told me that the spirits we help are Tahsa and Rotan both. We don't ease one group and neglect the other. That is what is means to be Tol Asa. I cannot hate any part of my heritage to do my work. What I try to do for the living is bring joy and comfort for lost loved ones. There is no one on earth unacquainted with grief."

Shaking out her shoulders, Eona said, "I must do what I came here to do, and end the suffering of the Tahsa people and the Rotan clans. I will not go to the Valley of the Forest King this year. I will never return here again."

chapter eight

daybreak

Most of the Sadan Taram slept in the same room with Sari that night. Balsa opened her eyes to find Kii snoring and most of the others asleep. Eona, too, was still sleeping.

Balsa remembered everything Eona had said the previous evening. Though young, she had a firm grasp on how others thought and felt.

I don't know if she's Jiguro's daughter or not, but she could be.

Before Balsa had left the Herb Market with the Sadan Taram, Gamal had told her that he thought Sari missed Jiguro, sometimes. "She was calm enough when they parted, but I caught her sighing on the way home. And I don't think she ever quite forgot him."

Balsa remembered watching Jiguro and Sari walk off together in the night and shook her head. Sari and the Sadan Taram were another job. After Jiguro made sure they were all safe and got paid, he left, just like Balsa had hoped he would. Neither one of them was suited to be a Sadan Taram full-time.

Balsa didn't know if Jiguro missed Sari. He'd started drinking a little more often after the job. Not a lot. He sang when he got drunk, just like Balsa did, but always the same song.

Looking away from Eona's sleeping form, Balsa thought about Sari. She was a lot older now, and Eona and the Sadan Taram had told her that Sari was suffering from some illness. She might not look the same anymore. Balsa might not even recognize her.

Suddenly, Eona coughed and sat up.

"Are you all right?" Balsa asked.

Eona nodded. Balsa poured her a cup of water and brought it to her.

"Thanks," Eona said hoarsely. She gripped the cup in both hands, then drank. "Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"No, I've been up for a while."

It was still dark outside the room's windows. The sun wouldn't rise for another hour yet.

Eona blinked crust out of her eyes. "I had... so many dreams."

"Nightmares?" Balsa asked.

"I'm not sure... Not all nightmares." She sighed. "I'm worried about what to do next. All of my dreams were about that."

Eona glanced sidelong at Balsa, looking nervous. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course you can."

"Will you promise not to tell Kii or Sansa?" She cast her eyes down. At Balsa's nod, she said, "I know what I said last night--that I wouldn't perform the ceremony in the Valley of the Forest King. But I think I might have made the wrong choice." She tripped over her words a little.

"But, I mean..." Eona took a deep breath, coughed again, then steadied herself. "If the Aru clan ceases to be, then there's no meaning

to the Sadan Taram coming here anyway. But I feel bad about leaving Lagaro's spirit here, when he hasn't been put to rest. I feel terrible that I can't give Rumina and Kumu closure and a greater understanding of their parents' secret."

Eona's face clouded over. "What if I do go back again? Just this once? Rumina and Kumu have already decided not to use the bones. If they swear their retainers to secrecy, it shouldn't be a problem."

"You'll almost certainly be attacked again," Balsa said. "I doubt Lord Azal and the Magua clan have forgotten the potential threat you pose to them."

"That's true." Eona shook her head sadly. "It seems so easy to start a war, and so hard to end one. Some memories are like embers. The hold the fire longer than everything else." She sighed. "I wonder if I'll ever have to open the way again. But even if I do, I won't perform the ceremony. That's something I chose, but... was it the right choice?"

Eona covered her face with her hands. "I have no confidence in myself." Her voice shook. "What if I don't have the right to make a choice like that?"

"Of course you do," Balsa said. "Sari chose not to perform the ceremony there, either, after Lord Shisal and Lady Oria put Lagaro's bones in that box."

"What? Really?"

"Yes. She said she would never perform it again, so that her life wouldn't be targeted anymore. She wasn't afraid of dying--she was afraid of Jiguro or me dying to save her. That's why she gave up doing it, after that."

“I wish I could talk to my mother...”

Balsa thought Eona looked very young in that moment: very young and very insecure.

I wish I could talk to Jiguro again, Balsa thought. She hadn’t felt the loss of him so strongly in a very long time. What would she say if she could speak to him now? Would she ask questions? Talk about old times? Would they go off and try to find work together, like always?

But Balsa would never see Jiguro again, and thinking about the possibility only caused her pain. She looked at Eona, who was wiping tears from her face, and said, “You might see her soon. And even if you don’t, our lives often wind down paths we don’t expect. Our choices matter, but we can’t tell where they’ll lead us until we’re there.”

Eona nodded. “Did my mother... did she say anything else to you?”

Balsa shook her head, then reached out and set her hand on Eona’s shoulder. “Even if she had, she’s the one you should talk to, not me.

“I hope she’s safe and well,” Eona said. “She was burning up with a fever when we parted.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” Balsa said.

Eona’s forehead creased. “Why?”

“My father’s been dead for many years, but sometimes--when I need to--I still hear his voice. If something has happened to Sari, she’ll still be able to reach you.”

“I don’t understand.”

Balsa smiled. “Well... My dad taught me a lot of things while he was alive, and those lessons return to me in some form or another. As I get

older, I realize that some of the things I didn't understand as a kid were lessons, too. Even though he's dead, everything he taught me remains in me. He's never stopped trying to save my life, even though he's gone."

Eona's cup was empty. Balsa took it and poured out more water for her.

"I don't think anyone--any parent--lives long enough to teach everything they know to their children," Balsa said. "But I think, if they can, that they teach us enough to figure out the rest on our own. And that's not a bad thing. I think it's always worked that way. Someday, I'll die too, and I'm sure I'll leave plenty of things unsaid that I simply forgot to pass on. But it doesn't make me sad." She handed Eona the cup again.

"No." Eona nodded shallowly. "Not sad. There's no way to perfectly transmit all of the knowledge of one person's life into someone else. As we age and die, the young rise up in our places. Cyclical, like seasons."

"Sure." Balsa looked around the world. "The young lord and lady I met the last time I was here are dead now. My father is dead--both of them are. And now we're here, their children and descendants, talking about them. Things always work out that way in the end."

Birds chirped outside. A sliver of early morning sunlight peeked over the horizon.

"Lady Oria and Lord Shisal died too young," Eona said. "I can't even imagine all the things they still wanted to say to their children. What they wanted to tell them. Rumina should have gotten a chance to ask them the questions she has now. They wouldn't want the Aru clan to be dissolved into another."

“Maybe, maybe not,” Balsa said. “The world changes quickly sometimes--all at once. And sometimes it doesn’t change at all. I think that, as parents, what they would want is for their children to be safe and happy, no matter what their clan name was.”

Eona nodded. “You may be right. When Lady Oria was here, she did her best to keep up the estate and make things brighter. She had flowers planted and wanted to fix the roads, the old outbuildings--so many things. Kii told me that the estate was a much more cheerful place when Lady Oria was alive. She would certainly want that for her children.”

Smiling feebly, Eona said. “My mother and Lady Oria were great friends. They would stay up all night talking to one another sometimes. I played with Rumina when we were both younger. Lady Oria wanted to revive the tradition of the Hanma Festival. She called me, Rumina and Kumu her darling Tol Asa children.”

Balsa smiled. “It would be nice, wouldn’t it, if the peace Lagaro wanted ever actually turned real. But that won’t happen as long as the secret gets kept, and telling it to King Ihan is too dangerous for everyone. It’s a shame, the possibilities that get lost.”

“Lost...” Eona trailed off. “But what if they didn’t have to be lost?”

Kii stirred and got up. “Conductor? Are you all right? How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” Eona said. “I’d like to talk to Rumina and Kumu about something, when they’re free. Can you ask them to visit me after breakfast?”

chapter nine

uncle and niece

Lord Azal looked down at his niece, dumbstruck. “Who proposed this? Agachi?”

“My mother and father,” Rumina said. “I was remembering all the things they had taught me, and all the things they wanted. I believe this proposal reflects what they would have wanted for myself, my brother, and the Magua clan.”

Azal set one hand in his lap, then rubbed his chin with the other. He’d gone mute with shock when Rumina had first suggested her proposal, but given a bit of time to reflect, all Azal felt now was surprise.

The proposal wasn’t something Rumina could have thought up herself. She had little experience with governing. However, it was obvious that Rakul Province was on the brink of open rebellion against the Magua clan. Azal expected Rumina and Kumu to oppose him, maybe, but not to offer him a deal that would grant equal benefits to both sides.

When he thought about it, Azal realized that Agachi could never have proposed such a thing, either. He hated the Magua clan too much.

For it to come from the mind of his sister made a certain kind of sense. He only regretted that Rumina hadn't come to him with it sooner.

Azal glanced at his guards, who were standing in the corners of the reception hall. "You may leave," he said.

The guards appeared surprised. Azal waved his hand and dismissed them again. The guards bowed once, then left. The hall seemed larger with them gone. There was a fire crackling in a large hearth. Cool air blew in through an open window.

"What do you mean?" Azal asked Rumina. "How did my sister and brother-and-law prompt this plan?"

"How... well, I suppose I was remembering them. I know that they wanted the Aru clan to continue on, so I considered how my mother would have managed it if she were alive, and asked my father's retainers for advice. I think they would both approve."

Azal nodded thoughtfully. He was used to thinking of his sister as someone who didn't plot, plan, and scheme, but that didn't mean there was anything wrong with her mind. *Oria was an idealist, and so was Shisal. They suited each other and wanted to make their ideals into reality... but they never got the chance.*

Rumina might now have that chance, and Azal was also sure they would be happy if he accepted the proposal. He doubted that they would have used their own daughter to secure peace terms, though. He was stunned at the revelations Rumina had told him so far. Oria had grown to fear her birth family, it seemed, and had put precautionary measures in place to protect her children.

I guess my sister truly became part of the Aru clan, in the end, Azal thought.

Rumina was looking up at him, her face pale and her expression tight with nervous tension. She'd always resembled his sister, but he'd never seen such a light of determination in her eyes.

Azal had pushed her to this, not because he'd wanted to harm her, but because he'd been trying to do what was best for his family. He regretted that now as he remembered reading to Rumina as she sat on his knee when she was a child. Before he became the Magua clan's ruling lord, he would bring candy and presents for his niece and nephew and spend as much time with them as he could. Rumina always shared gifts she received with her brother and parents. She was a kind-hearted girl.

But she was now grown, and her parents were no longer around to advise and protect her. That role had fallen to him, and he had failed in his duty... but she hadn't. And he could still help give her the future that her parents wanted.

"Very well," Azal said. "I agree to your proposal. Shall we discuss particulars?"

Rumina's eyebrows shot up, making her appear younger for a few moments until her expression settled.

"If we both agree, we will no longer greet one another as uncle and niece, but as clan lord and clan lord," he said. "I'm inclined to agree because I think this will help us both. You found my clan's weakness, and I know the Aru clan needs a fair amount of help. I'm relieved that we can help one another."

Rumina had told Azal that she knew the secret about Lagaro's remains. She knew everything that her parents had done in the Valley of the Forest King twenty years before. She had proposed that Azal accompany her to the Valley of the Forest King in two days so that they might recover Lagaro's bones together.

Rumina wanted the Aru clan and the Magua clan to decide what to do with the bones and the secret they held, without trying to use that secret against one another. Lagaro was a hero who had wanted peace and tolerance, and now, they could finally give that to him.

But that wasn't the end of Rumina's proposal. If it was, Azal wouldn't have any real reason to agree. The bones were currently hidden and the secret was undiscovered; that was enough for the Magua clan. He was saddened that his sister had known or guessed everything--and that her father had tried to murder her friend, the leader of the Sadan Taram. He hated that his sister had been forced to resort to blackmail to protect herself. He expected Rumina, Kumu, and their servants and retainers to hate him for his part in ordering the new leader of the Sadan Taram assassinated.

But Rumina, at least, had no hatred for her mother's family. He believed her when she said she wanted to reconcile and make things right. It helped that her proposal would also improve the fortunes of the Aru clan, which had suffered tremendously over the course of the past few decades.

Azal still had reason to distrust the proposal, if not his niece. The Aru clan's retainers might see his visit to the Valley of the Forest King as a prime opportunity to assassinate him. The Valley of the Forest King

itself was said to be cursed. Only Aru clan lords and the Sadan Taram were supposed to be able to enter it safely.

And so, Azal had rejected Rumina's initial proposal, but agreed to her amended one. She offered to invite King Ihan to the Valley of the Forest King as well. No harm would come to anyone then, and Rumina and Azal could focus on their primary purpose, which was to decide what to do with Lagaro's bones and the secret of his assassination.

It was too late in the year for King Ihan to arrive in time for the ceremony, so it was decided that they would all go to the Valley of the Forest King the following year, provided that King Ihan agreed.

Rumina penned the invitation. She summarized Lagaro's history and indicated that King Ihan might have an interest in him as a heroic icon of peace in the province. King Ihan's reply was favorable and came swiftly: he would come to Rakul Province the following year for the ceremony on the appointed date. He promised that if there was urgent business that prevented him from coming, he would send representatives and guards in his place, as well as scribes to record the event for him.

Azal understood why Prince Ihan would find Lagaro's story appealing. He was new to his crown and had inherited a country on the brink of war. Only the Talsh defeat had made Rota whole again. A hero whose ideal was peace suited King Ihan's goals as a ruler and as a person.

While King Ihan visited, Rumina and Azal intended to make the case for the final part of her proposal: to establish the Aru clan and the Magua clan as separate again. Sadly, it was too late to amend Rumina's marriage contract, which she'd already signed. Her marriage would go

on as planned, but in a year, Kumu would become the new lord of the independent Aru clan.

King Ihan would probably agree. He had always favored the Tal people and other peoples who were downtrodden and oppressed. If the Tahsa people could regain some of their lost pride and glory through Kumu, King Ihan would support it.

This outcome wouldn't harm the Magua clan, either, since neither the Magua clan nor the Aru clan could try to harm one another with the secret of Lagaro's assassination any longer. They could publicize what they found in the Valley of the Forest King as they saw fit. Rumina's marriage would satisfy the Magua clan; Kumu's new status as the Aru clan lord would keep the Aru clan's retainers from revolt. Both sides would benefit from Rakul Province being truly at peace. Instead of hating one another and trying to sabotage one another's success, it was time for the Magua clan and the Aru clan to work together, like Lagaro had always dreamed.

Azal had never expected this outcome. A proposal like Rumina's could never have come from him or anyone in the Magua clan. He hadn't expected the Aru clan to offer an olive branch, since they were clearly the ones who'd been wronged more.

Bright sunshine cut through the open window onto a beautiful woven rug at their feet. The autumn light was warm and burnished gold. Azal and Rumina sat in his audience hall again, as they had done often these past few weeks, and read over the amended terms of the shared proposal one last time.

It's time to start over, Azal thought.

“You shall be the acting lord of the Aru clan until your marriage,” Azal said. “And with that, let us seal our agreement.”

Rumina nodded cautiously.

“I think I owe you at least a little bit of the truth,” Azal said. “Every lord of the Magua clan since ancient times has been told about Lagaro’s poisoning. We did it: I won’t deny it. But the Magua clan lord wasn’t responsible. He sincerely wanted peace and intended Lagaro no harm.

“However, on the night that Lagaro was set to return to his own estate, he came down with a terrible fever. A woman was in the room with him, laughing. She was one of the Magua clan lord’s concubines, and she had poisoned Lagaro because her son had recently been killed in a battle against the Aru clan. The son would have ruled the Magua clan after his father’s death, if he had lived.

“Lagaro commanded that his poisoning be kept secret. He didn’t want his brother or the rest of his family to find out. He had no desire to provoke another war. He also gave commands to be buried in the Valley of the Forest King, so that the manner of his death would be kept secret for as long as possible. It was better for people to believe that he had died in an accident or from than illness than from poison. All he truly wanted was peace.”

Azal frowned. “Lagaro didn’t blame the Magua clan for his death, but Magua clan lords have borne the shame of it all the same. We did not prevent it, and a Magua clan woman performed the deed. It will be a relief not to have to keep this a secret anymore.”

Rumina appeared surprised by this information. Her eyes went wide and she bit her lip as she processed it all.

“Rumina,” Azal said, “you have been leading your clan for a few months already, and will be an official clan lord for a few months. Please tell your brother what I’m about to say, too. Being a clan lord is a lot of responsibility, and responsibility isn’t just a word. We bear our people’s shame and guilt and fear as well as their hopes and dreams for the future. Everything you do reflects on the clan, and if the clan suffers, your people suffer. Think about what might have happened if Lagaro had decided to blame us for his death. It would have meant war, and he knew that. It would have meant more suffering for our people and for his.”

Azal considered for a moment. “I know your brother bears a certain grudge against us, but it’s not something I can permit to affect policy. If he treats us poorly, we’ll have no choice but to do the same. I intend to give him every advantage I can to get his feet under him as a new clan lord, but if he rejects my help or tries to create division again, I will have to intervene for the sake of all our people.”

Rumina nodded thoughtfully. “When we go to the Valley of the Forest King... if we find the bones, would you permit Kumu and I to rebury them? I think that would do a great deal to quench his anger against the Magua clan.”

Azal thought about that. “Your brother is under Agachi’s influence, is he not? I’ve heard him speaking of Tahsa pride and preserving the legacy of his people with alarming frequency--as if the Magua clan was actively trying to stamp out Tahsa people in the province. Did you know your brother held such thoughts?”

“Um, I did, yes.” She looked down. “There’s a lot of complaining going on in our province. Food shortages, bad roads, not a lot of places

to work. A lot of people, including Aru clan retainers, blame the Magua clan for all of that, and Kumu listens to them." Her eyes lit up. "Uncle, I have a request."

"What is it?"

"Could you postpone my marriage? Just for a while."

"Why?"

"Even with the reassurance that the Aru clan won't be swallowed up by the Magua clan forever, the people in the Aru domain are still suffering. They won't trust the Magua clan unless things improve. With your help, I can start making improvements on their behalf, and hand the province over to Kumu better than when I first took over.

"Kumu is still young. Agachi's son is his best friend. I'll be able to change more hearts and minds if they see us working together for a few months than I will if I simply vanish from my ancestral home. That might spark more discontent before we create a lasting peace."

Rumina's eyes reminded him of his sister when she'd first discovered the cause of Lagaro's death in the Valley of the Forest King. She had come to her father to bargain, and Azal had been present. Rumina was preparing to step into her mother's place.

Azal took in Rumina's serious expression, then nodded. "Postponement, then. Until when?"

"Until next year," Rumina said. "King Ihan's visit."

Azal nodded. "All right."

"And on that occasion, I'd like to do something else." Rumina leaned forward, causing the pendant around her neck to hang down. It was small and relatively plain, covered with symbols: the Magua clan flower,

grain representing the goddess Hanma, the shape of a star to symbolize Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens.

Azal remembered that amulet. It had belonged to his sister, and she'd worn it everywhere.

"Do you remember my mother calling me and Kumu her precious Tol Asa children, since we descend from both the Tahsa people and the Magua clan?"

"I do," Azal said quietly. Oria had started calling Rumina her precious Tol Asa child right after Rumina was born. She'd loved the story of the Hanma festival and had singers and storytellers repeat it for her over and over again.

"I want to revive the Hanma festival in my mother's memory," she said. "She wanted to revive it more than anything, before she died. I want to at least try to do that for her. What do you think?"

Azal didn't have to think too long about that idea at all. He was already feeling guilt for not supporting his sister's children as he should have. Besides, it truly would be a fitting memorial for Oria.

Azal shifted in his seat to look out the window. Evening was coming on. There would be time enough to start making plans for the future tomorrow.

epilogue
where the wind takes us

A strong wind blew through the rasal reeds lining the lake, making the walls of Sari's hut shake. Even huddled up inside with the screens woven of more rasal reeds covering the windows, the air was frigid and made the fire in the hearth waver.

Gamal was roasting fish over the fire. The smell roused Sari to wakefulness. She sat up and stretched. "Do you hear that?" she asked.

Gamal's thick eyebrows drew together. "Do you think they're coming back?" He smiled a little, scratching at his beard.

The wind carried the sound of bells and drums to Sari's hut.

"I want to get up," Sari said. "Help me."

Gamal came to Sari's bedside and took her arm to support her as she stood up. She wrapped a woven blanket around her shoulders and shivered. A few moments later, the thick door woven of several layers of rasal reeds opened, and Eona passed through it.

"Mom!"

Eona tore off her coat and shoved it at Kii, who was coming in the door behind her. Eona hugged her tightly for a moment, and Sari laughed. She could feel the water harp tucked safe and sound against Eona's chest.

Eona's hair and face were cold from the wind outside. "Maybe we should have stayed in Oki for the night and tried arriving tomorrow. It's so cold! But I couldn't wait to be home," she said.

Sari and Eona hugged for a long time, then broke apart, smiling at one another. Sari rubbed her cheek against her daughter's in greeting. "Welcome home," she said quietly.

“I’m glad to be here.”

Eona shivered. She moved a little closer to the fire, then said, “Mom, we have so much to talk about. It was a remarkable journey. I don’t even know where to start.”

The corner of Sari’s mouth quirked upward. “I heard a few things from Gamal. He said that Balsa showed up and protected you at the Herb Market. But let’s have supper and get you all warmed up first. After that, we can talk as long as we like.”

Kii and Sansa were also in the hut, unpacking. Then nodded gratefully at Sari. The hut, formerly quiet except for the sound of the wind, was now noisy and a little crowded. After dinner, Eona told Sari about everything that had happened to them.

Sari waxed nostalgic about her own journey to Rakul Province so many years before. *So Jiguro is dead, then,* she thought. That was hard to believe. He’d always seemed so strong. Eona was the daughter who had been born less than a year after that summer night. She wondered if Balsa knew. If Balsa had known all along.

“I’d like to talk to Balsa,” Sari said. “Did she come?”

“No,” Sansa said. “She parted with us a while back, headed home to New Yogo.”

“I hope she doesn’t get caught in a blizzard,” Sari said. “It’s a terrible time of year to travel.”

“That’s one reason we hurried home ourselves,” Sansa said, rubbing her chilblained hands together.

Kii laughed. “I’m sure Balsa’s eager to get home to her husband’s warm arms.”

The fire crackled, spreading warmth, as the winter wind tried and failed to blow the walls of the hut down. Eona stared off into the distance lost in memory, and resumed the story of her journey.

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The door to Tanda's hut was half-buried by drifting snow. Someone was trying to force it open. Tanda peeled himself away from the warmth of the fire, motivated to help, and made it to the door just as Balsa slipped inside and shut it behind her, panting.

"You climbed all the way up here in a blizzard?" Tanda asked, alarmed.

"It's not a blizzard. Just a little blowing snow, is all." Balsa stomped snow off her boots. Everything she owned was wet through, including her spear and coat. She stripped her coat off, shivering, and hung it up to dry.

The scent of wild mushroom stew reached Balsa's nostrils. She inhaled deeply, savoring the warmth in the air along with the smell of food. There were other familiar scents in the hut that soothed her: drying herbs, the sweet smoke from the firewood, the sharp cold of a gust of wind. This was what home smelled like.

"I was sure you'd spend the winter in Rota," Tanda said.

"I might have if the weather hadn't cooperated. But the first snow hadn't fallen yet when I crossed the border. I made good time."

Balsa extended her cold-red hands over the fire set in the floor. Torogai was away from the hut; it was her custom to visit a hot spring

at the end of autumn until the worst of the winter cold abated, since the hot water helped her aging joints. Tanda usually spent most winters alone, treating the injuries of the hunters in the mountains who chased after boar and other game. Most often, the hunters paid him in meat.

"The last hunter I treated was lucky. I got a whole boar out of him. We have plenty to eat tonight, so help yourself."

Tanda ladled some of the stew bubbling over the fire into a bowl and passed it to Balsa. There was seasoned boar meat in it, so soft and juicy that it melted in her mouth. The fattiness of the meat brought out more flavor in the wild mushrooms. The stew was hot enough to warm her all the way through in moments.

Tanda ladled out his own bowl of stew, then picked it up and took a seat next to Balsa. "I was cleaning the inside of the roof a few days ago and missing you. When I climbed down and was looking for a broom, I found this." He reached out and rolled a stick across the floor.

Balsa recognized it: the stick was one of the first practice spears that Jiguro had made for her. There was no spearhead and it was quite thin, but it was almost as tall as her normal spear. She remembered a time when she'd thought it was the heaviest thing in the whole world.

The surface of the practice spear was nicked and gouged in many places. Jiguro had never allowed her or Tanda to smooth them out. Jiguro called them the spear's wounds, and seemed to think that it was important for the spear to keep them.

Balsa reached out to touch the practice spear with her greasy hands, forgetting to wipe them until she noticed the shiny impressions that her fingertips left on the wood. "This was a good weapon," Balsa said. "It still is."

Balsa thought about her early life with Jiguro--fleeing Kanbal, getting her first practice spear, getting *this* practice spear. When she was ten, Jiguro had given her the spear she carried now, with a real point, and that was when she'd really started learning to defend herself. To defend others.

"I haven't thought about this practice spear in so long," Balsa muttered. "How many years has it been? I guess it doesn't matter."

Tanda raised an eyebrow.

Balsa smiled at him. "Don't mind me; I'm just in a mood. Thinking about how long it's been since Jiguro died."

Tanda nodded sadly. "I'm not sure measuring an event like that in terms of time is right. We should measure in moments, one flowing into the other. That way, Jiguro is still alive, in a way. He shared so many moments with you, and as long as you remember, you'll have them."

Moments. Suddenly, Balsa remembered the Sadan Taram walking through a golden field in their bright clothes, instruments in hand.

"I was thinking," Balsa said, setting her practice spear aside, "that we should go to Rota next year, when the snow melts."

"Go to Rota again so soon? Why?"

"There's going to be a festival to the goddess Hanma in Rakul Province."

"What's the festival about?"

"You'd like it. Men and women from different clans meet and mingle together during the day. If they like one another, they can decide to get married at night. Romantic, isn't it?"

Tanda didn’t seem too enthused about the idea. Balsa allowed herself a moment to enjoy his confusion. She hadn’t seen that face in so long. Then, finally, she told Tanda about her latest journey with the Sadan Taram.

Balsa was grateful to be inside, comfortable and warm with Tanda: the story she had to tell was a long one. As she spoke, the love song Jiguro had sung echoed in the back of her mind, as if carried by the winter wind.

The cold wind blows
over the Yusa Mountains
under the moon.
I go to the peak,
spear in hand,
step by step.
The world is hidden in white,
swept away by an avalanche.
I go to the peak,
spear in hand,
step by step,
with the season's last flower
held over my heart.

THE END

Afterword

I stopped writing *Where the Wind Takes Us* in the middle I don't know how many times. I wasn't sure it would ever be finished! I tried to set it aside and forget about it; there are already two books of short stories about Balsa, so I didn't really see the need for another one.

Then the head editor who was working on the writing for the *Guardian of the Spirit* drama series approached me one day and asked if I ever intended to write more about Balsa's past with Jiguro. I told him that I didn't, then laughed, but the question prompted that idea in the back of my mind.

I had a grasp of this new idea I wanted to explore almost instantly. I'm not sure why I was able to see it so clearly, especially after spending so many years not writing stories for the series. I think I was affected by the sudden loss of my mother, whom I loved deeply. I knew that I was writing about grief, and I tried to do it in a different way than *Guardian of the Darkness*, which is more about the death of a father, not a mother.

Uehashi Nahoko

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